THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

LAURA LEE HOPE

Elaine Higgins

"THIS IS THE LIFE!" CRIED MOLLIE.

The Outdoor Girls Around the Campfire. *Frontispiece*—(*Page* 96)

The Outdoor Girls Around the Campfire

or

The Old Maid of the Mountains

BY

LAURA LEE HOPE

AUTHOR OF "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS OF DEEPDALE," "THE OUTDOOR GIRLS IN THE SADDLE," "THE MOVING PICTURE GIRLS," "THE BOBBSEY TWINS," "BUNNY BROWN AND HIS SISTER SUE," "SIX LITTLE BUNKERS AT GRANDMA BELL'S," "MAKE BELIEVE STORIES," ETC.

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(Eleven Titles)

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THE OUTDOOR GIRLS AROUND THE CAMPFIRE

CHAPTER I

PLANS

"PUTT—putt—putt!" came the rhythmic throb of the motor as the little motor boat sped over the glassy surface of the lake, stirring up the water on either side of it and leaving a frothy white trail in its wake.

"How's this for speed?" chortled the girl at the wheel, a pretty, dark-haired girl with dancing brown eyes. "I reckon we could beat any other boat on this old lake."

"And then some!" agreed Mollie Billette, slangily. "I wish some one would come along and challenge us to a race."

"It would provide some excitement, anyway," sighed Grace Ford, as she lounged in the bow of the pretty little boat. "Looks like a pretty dull summer to me, so far."

"How do you get that way, Grace Ford?" cried Betty Nelson, she of the dark hair and

dancing eyes whom the girls fondly called "Little Captain." "Tell 'em, Amy," she added, to the quiet, sweet-faced girl who lounged beside Mollie Billette. "Tell 'em what you told me a little while ago."

Grace Ford sat upright, a chocolate half-way to her mouth, while Mollie Billette's black eyes regarded the "Little Captain" severely.

"Betty Nelson, what have you been holding back from us?" she demanded, but Betty was still looking at Amy Blackford.

"Tell 'em, Amy," she repeated. "The news is too good to keep."

"I'll say it is," agreed Amy, a smile lighting up her quiet face. "When Henry spoke of it to me at first I thought it was too good to be true. I supposed he was joking."

"Told you what?" cried Mollie Billette, in an exasperated tone. "If you are not the most aggravating——"

"Hold your horses, old dear," drawled Grace Ford, quietly helping herself to another piece of candy. "Amy has the floor——"

"The deck, you mean," murmured Amy, then added hastily, as the girls threw impatient glances her way: "I'll tell you just how it happened if you give me a chance. You see, Henry," Henry was Amy's older brother, "had a chance to take

over an old shack near the upper end of Rainbow Lake in part payment for a debt. And now that he has the shack, he doesn't know what to do with it."

The girls leaned toward Amy eagerly.

"Then what?" asked Mollie.

"Why," said Amy, with a smile of quiet enjoyment, "I told him I thought we girls might help him out, for the summer, anyway. I thought it would be a great lark to camp out there during vacation."

"Amy, you are a wonder," drawled Grace, but Mollie broke in impatiently.

"Is he going to let us have it?" she demanded.

"I should say so!" laughed Amy. "Said he would be glad to put it to some sort of use. He said it would make a mighty fine summer camp but that was about all it was good for."

"It will be ideal," broke in the Little Captain, happily, as she brushed a wind-blown strand of hair from her eyes. "Why, at the upper end of Rainbow Lake we'll be as much alone as if we were in an African forest."

"More so, I hope," drawled Grace, adding with a little shudder: "For in an African forest they have wild animals for company while here——"

"We sha'n't see anything wilder than a chipmunk," chuckled the Little Captain.

"Suits me fine," said Grace heartily. "Wolves and bears may be all right, but give me a chipmunk every time."

"My, isn't she brave?" said Mollie, admiringly, and the other girls chuckled.

"Tell us more about this little shack, Amy," said Betty, after a while. "Is it very tiny, or is it big enough to contain us all without squeezing?"

"Henry said it is of fair size," replied Amy, wrinkling her forehead in an attempt to remember details. "There are two rooms in it and the rooms are furnished in a rough sort of way, with home-made furniture."

The Little Captain let go of the wheel long enough to clap her hands gleefully.

"Great!" she cried. "This gets better every minute. Think of it. A house ready-made for us, and furnished, at that."

"Too much luxury," drawled Grace.

It was the first day of July and the Outdoor Girls, never completely happy unless they were engaged in some outdoor sport, had embarked in their pretty motor boat *Gem* for a sail down the Argono river. Although the motor boat was really Betty's property, the Outdoor Girls rather regarded it as their own. And indeed, when it is considered that none of the four ever

used it without the other three, it was the same to them as though the ownership were actually theirs. As a matter of fact, what belonged to one of the Outdoor Girls automatically belonged to all of them.

Those who have kept in touch with Betty and her chums will need no introduction to the *Gem,* but for the benefit of those who do not know these Outdoor Girls so well, we will give a brief description of it. For in this story the trim little motor boat plays rather an important part.

First of all, the *Gem* had been given to Betty by an uncle of hers, a retired sea captain by the name of Amos Marlin. The old fellow had produced the best craft of its size that could be found anywhere. There was a large cockpit in the stern, and a tiny cooking galley. Also the little boat boasted a small trunk cabin and an unusually powerful and efficient motor. Altogether a snappy little craft, well meriting its name of *Gem.*

And now, as the girls putt-putted briskly down the river, the thrill of summer filling them with a fresh eagerness for adventure, it is no wonder that Amy's suggestion of a summer camp on the banks of Rainbow Lake was greeted with enthusiasm.

So far, having made no plans for the summer

months, they had about decided to spend a rather uneventful summer in Deepdale, the thriving and busy little town in which they had been brought up.

It might have been supposed, since Deepdale was situated so pleasantly on the banks of the Argono—the latter emptying some miles below into pretty Rainbow Lake—and since the bustling population of the town itself numbered something like fifteen thousand, that the Outdoor Girls would have been content to spend a summer there.

However, although they agreed that Deepdale was "the finest place in the world," change and adventure were what they really hankered after, and Deepdale was too familiar a spot to offer them either.

But there was real adventure in the idea of camping out in the romantic little shack so recently acquired by Amy Blackford's brother, and they welcomed it eagerly.

"I suppose we ought to run down there and look the place over," said Grace, cautiously. Grace was the only one of the four Outdoor Girls who really considered comfort where adventure was concerned, and this trait of hers no amount of ridicule or impatience on the part of the other girls could overcome. For Grace, who

was tall and slim and graceful, was very fond of her ease. Once she was assured that an outing was to be "comfortable," then she could start in to enjoy herself.

So at this suggestion that they "run down there and look the place over" the girls exchanged a glance of martyrdom.

"Why, of course," said Mollie sarcastically, "Grace will have to be sure she has a real hair mattress to sleep on and clean sheets twice a week. Maybe we could manage to get an easy chair aboard the *Gem*—one like the kind Betty's dad uses."

"A fine idea," replied Grace, unabashed. "I never gave you credit for so much thoughtfulness, Mollie dear. Have a chocolate?"

Mollie sniffed disdainfully.

"Keep your old chocolates," she said. "The next time you offer me one I've a good mind to throw the whole box overboard."

"Just try it," said Grace, lazily. "You'd have to toss me over, too, you know."

"Shouldn't mind in the least," said Mollie, at which the Little Captain laughed and Amy Blackford chuckled.

"Talk about wild animals," cried Betty, gayly. "We won't need any with you and Grace about, Mollie dear. Two wildcats are enough."

"Did you hear what she called us?" asked Grace, feeling abused, but Mollie was looking the other way.

"We've gone a pretty long way down the river," she said. "Look, Betty, isn't that the new lake steamer, the *General Pershing?*"

Betty, who had been too absorbed in plans for the summer to notice particularly where she was going, followed the direction of Mollie's pointing finger.

Suddenly her breath caught in a gasp and a thrill of apprehension swept over her. The steamer was indeed the *General Pershing* the great shining new boat which plied up and down the lake and the river, and it was coming toward them at what, to the Little Captain, seemed an appalling rate of speed.

"Betty," cried Mollie, leaning forward and catching Betty's arm, "we're right in the path of it! For goodness' sake, sheer over."

"I can't—very far!" said Betty, tight-lipped. "It's shallow, near the shore and—the rocks——"

Mollie took in the situation with a glance and a little groan of dismay escaped her. At this point the river was very narrow and the shore on either side bristled with cruel, jagged-looking rocks. A small boat like the *Gem* would be dashed to pieces upon them. Betty was right.

It would be madness to encroach too far upon them.

And yet on the other hand the steamer menaced them with destruction. Bearing down full upon them, it could not fail to meet them squarely in the middle of that narrow channel!

Useless for Betty to stop the motor. They had no time to turn, speeding back to the safety of the wider water. If Betty kept her head, holding the boat away from the oncoming steamer and at the same time far enough from the rocks—

Amy and Grace, now fully alive to the peril of the situation, were leaning forward, their faces white, their breath coming in terrified gasps.

The Little Captain, her hand resolutely on the wheel, a prayer for guidance in her heart, watched the oncoming rush of the big steamboat.

CHAPTER II

ALMOST A COLLISION

On, on came the big steamboat, looming larger as it bore down upon them! Nearer, nearer, while the wash from its approach reached the little motor boat in sickening undulations—a danger not thought of before! They would be swept on to the rocks!

Closer, closer! It would strike them! It must! It was over them, gigantic, overwhelming! The girls nerved themselves for the shock that was to come. Grace closed her eyes—

And then—the steamer had passed. Betty had swerved at just the right moment to escape collision. The *Gem* was acting like a drunken man, swirling and reeling in the heavy wash of the great steamer.

They were heading straight toward the rocks, driven by the agitated waves. In another moment they would be dashed upon them—

"Betty!" screamed Grace. "We'll be killed! The rocks!"

But the wail was drowned in the sudden roar of the motor. The *Gem* leaped forward, her nose swung around to meet the oncoming waves. Gallantly she plowed through the water which was lashed to a froth by the progress of the steamer, just grazing a jagged edge of rock, flinging spray over her bows, soaking the girls.

Then she was free of the channel, speeding for the safety of the open water. Betty, looking back over her shoulder, saw that the decks of the *General Pershing* were black with people who had rushed to the rail to see the fate of the motor boat.

The steamer had slowed down and half turned around as though intending to come to the rescue, but, seeing that this was unnecessary, she straightened once more, continuing on her way.

Betty's hands trembled on the wheel. The reaction left her faint and sick. As though from a long distance she heard Mollie's voice saying:

"Well, if that wasn't a narrow squeak, I never saw one!"

"It was the Little Captain saved us," said Amy. "She knew just what to do, as she always does."

And this indeed was the reason for Betty Nelson's nickname of "Little Captain." For this brown-haired, brown-eyed girl seemed always to

know just what to do at a critical moment and, more than this, she always did it. She was just eighteen and the only daughter of a rich carpet manufacturer of Deepdale. It was hard to tell which Betty loved the more, her kindly, indulgent father or her lovely mother.

Grace Ford, the second of the Outdoor Girls, was tall and slender, fond of her comfort and loving candy and sodas and sweets of all sorts. Her father was a distinguished lawyer and her mother was a fine looking woman who spent a good deal of her time in club activities. Grace also had a brother, Will Ford, of whom she was passionately fond.

Then there was Mollie Billette, daughter of Mrs. Pauline Billette, a well-to-do, sprightly little widow with more than a dash of French blood in her veins. Perhaps her French ancestry explains Mollie's quick temper. Mollie also had a little brother and sister, twins and seven years old. The latter were always in mischief, and although Mollie loved them dearly, she sometimes found it very hard to have patience with them.

The last of the quartette of Outdoor Girls was Amy Blackford, whom the girls had first known as Amy Stonington. She was the ward of John and Sarah Stonington and at one time there had been considerable mystery regarding her real

parentage. Later, when the mystery was solved, Amy found out that not only was her real name Blackford but that she was possessed of a splendid brother as well, Henry Blackford. Like Mollie, Amy was seventeen, but there the resemblance ended. She was as quiet as Mollie was hot-tempered, and there was something sweet and appealing about her that roused the protective instinct of the more vigorous girls.

So much for the girls. Then, there were the four boys who almost invariably accompanied the girls on their adventures. There was, of course, Will Ford, Grace's brother, who, as a soldier in the World War had distinguished himself by some clever secret service work. Will loved quiet Amy Blackford and Amy, in turn, made no secret of her feeling for him.

There was Allen Washburn, the clever young lawyer who thought the Little Captain was about the nicest person in the world. Allen had enlisted at the call of the United States to arms. He was made a sergeant in the American Army and, although he had gone over a sergeant, he came back with a commission as lieutenant. No wonder the girls—and especially Betty—were proud of him!

Frank Haley was another of the boys in the little group. A splendid young fellow, liked by

all the girls, and liking them all, he had been introduced into "the crowd" because of his friendship for Will Ford.

There was, too, Roy Anderson, jolly and full of fun, always ready for everything that came along. Perhaps Mollie expressed the general sentiment toward him when she said that they were fond of Roy chiefly because he always kept them amused. And how apt we are to love the person that amuses us!

The girls had earned their title of "Outdoor Girls" from the fact that they almost always managed to spend their vacations in the open. And because of this they had run into a great number of adventures.

There was, for instance, their first tramping tour of the country, the incidents of which are told in the first volume of the series, entitled "The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale." There had followed many other adventures, at Rainbow Lake, at Ocean View, in Florida, and, later, on an island called Pine Island where they had found many interesting things, including a real gypsy cave.

During the war they had served in a Hostess House while the boys, together with countless others of our fine American lads, sailed off across the ocean to fight for liberty.

Another summer they had spent at Wild Rose Lodge, a lovely spot hidden deep in the woods where they became interested in a poor old man who thought his two sons had been killed in the war.

In the volume directly preceding this, entitled "The Outdoor Girls in the Saddle," these girls had had one of their most interesting adventures. Mrs. Nelson, Betty's mother, through the death of a relative, had become the owner of a ranch.

The most important thing about this ranch—in the estimation of the girls, at least—was the fact that it was situated right in the midst of a great gold-mining district. How the girls with Mr. and Mrs. Nelson went to the ranch, spending a glorious few weeks in the saddle, and how gold was finally found on the ranch is told of in detail in that volume.

And now we turn once more to the present with Betty Nelson, the Little Captain, saving her chums from the peril of collision with the great river steamer *General Pershing*.

As for Betty, although the girls heaped her with their praises, she had never felt less like a heroine in her life.

Scarcely knowing what she did, she turned the nose of the little boat back toward Deepdale. The thought was unpleasant that once more they

would be forced to pass through that narrow channel, bounded on either side by the rocky shore.

However, this time there was no *General Pershing* bearing relentlessly down upon them and they passed through the dangerous spot without further mishap.

"Goodness, I'm glad that's over!" said Grace, relaxing once more in her seat, her voice still tremulous.

"We couldn't possibly have met that old boat in a worse place," said Mollie, glaring resentfully after the *General Pershing,* whose bulk was diminishing rapidly in the distance.

"Well," said Betty, trying to laugh and not making a very good job of it, "there's no use blaming the steamer. We shouldn't have been there, you know."

"Don't you want me to take the wheel, Betty?" spoke up Amy, suddenly. "Come back here in my place and I'll take the *Gem* the rest of the way."

But though she smiled at her, Betty denied firmly that there was any reason why she should give up the wheel.

"I'm all right," she said, adding, as she rounded the curve of an island, skirting the shore toward Deepdale: "Do you want to stay out any longer, or shall we call it a day and go up to my house?

Mother said there was an apple pie in the refrigerator and some ginger ale on the ice."

"Oh, boy!" sighed Grace ecstatically. "Lead me to it."

"So say we all of us," said Mollie, and Amy joined in the chorus. Strange how their terrifying experience of a few minutes before disappeared in the distance as they thought of apple pie!

"And we can talk over our plans for camping, too," said Amy, at which the girls realized that they had not thought of Henry Blackford's shack in the woods for five whole minutes. This would never do.

By the time they had reached the dock at Deepdale they had nearly forgotten their encounter with the *General Pershing* and so were genuinely surprised when they saw Allen hurrying toward them.

At sight of the tall figure Betty's heart missed a beat and her face felt suddenly hot. If only she might stop that miserable habit of blushing —especially when Allen was around!

CHAPTER III

ENTER THE TWINS

"Gee Christopher, but you girls gave me a scare!" exploded the young lawyer, as soon as he came within speaking range. His words included all the girls but his look was only for Betty.

"What do you mean, gave you a scare?" asked Mollie, her black eyes dancing. "We haven't seen you for almost a week."

"Maybe Betty has," murmured Grace, with a wicked glance at the Little Captain.

"No, I haven't," said the latter, looking up demurely. The furious color had subsided and she was just flushed enough to look unusually pretty. As for what Allen thought—

"Look here," he said, abruptly, his handsome young face very serious as he searched Betty's expression, "did Babcock tell me the truth when he said the *General Pershing* almost ran you down?"

On Betty's face was a look of bewilderment.

"How did you know?" she questioned. "It only just happened?"

"Who's Babcock?" asked Grace, with interest.

"A lawyer I've met once or twice," returned Allen, still with his worried eyes fixed on Betty. "We ran into each other a few minutes ago. Seems he just landed from the *General Pershing* and he was full of this incident. Said it was a miracle the boat wasn't wrecked. The description he gave me of it sounded very much like the *Gem.*"

"It was the *Gem,*" said Mollie.

"But he was wrong about a miracle saving us," put in Amy, throwing an arm about the Little Captain. "It was Betty."

Allen was on the verge of saying that Betty was a miracle, anyhow, but, considering that there were a good many people about, thought better of it. However, his eyes spoke for him.

"You must be more careful, Betty," he said, taking the rope from her with which she was making the *Gem* fast to the dock. "You mustn't take such chances when I'm not around."

He was close to her and speaking in a low tone. Amy and Mollie and Grace had considerately turned away and were walking slowly in the direction of Betty's house. Having fastened the little boat securely, Betty and Allen turned to follow them.

"Please promise you'll be more careful when

I'm not with you," Allen persisted, and Betty glanced up at him with a hint of laughter in her eyes. But the laughter hid a little hurt, for Betty was feeling a bit neglected. Mollie was right when she said they had not seen nor heard from Allen for several days. Of course he had been busy—he always was—but just the same—

So said Betty:

"If I took chances only when you were around, I wouldn't take very many, would I?"

She tried to speak lightly but she did not quite succeed, not as far as Allen was concerned. Looking down at her suddenly serious little face he wished that they might be alone for just five minutes so that he might explain. And he was in such a rush!

"That isn't fair," he said, gravely. "You know I wouldn't have stayed away if I hadn't had to. Look here, Betty—dear," they had come to a corner and he had stopped, facing her. He had an appointment at three-thirty and here it was three-twenty-five this minute. "I can't stay now, I've got to rush. Can I see you to-night?"

What perverse imp in Betty made her answer lightly:

"I have an engagement to-night, Allen."

All at once the young lawyer looked savage. Confound that engagement!

"Betty," he said, desperately, "I'm coming tonight anyway, and if you won't see me I'll camp on your doorstep till you do."

With this threat he turned and hurried down the street, his back as stiff as a ramrod, the heavy frown still on his brow. Why, he thought, gloomily, did Betty always have to look most adorable just when she was going to be most aggravating? How was he going to keep his mind on business, anyway, when all he could think of was Betty's face?

Meanwhile, Betty had looked musingly after his retreating figure and then, at the thought of the savage look on his face, chuckled unfeelingly. Just the same, her eyes were a little wistful as she hurried to catch up with the girls. She did wish his old business wouldn't take up so much of his time! Maybe if he had taken up medicine, now, instead of the law—but no, that would have been worse yet. Doctors never had any time at all to themselves. She was still wondering whether she ought to see Allen that night—knowing all the time that she would not miss seeing him for the world—when the girls turned and spied her.

"Well, did we walk slowly enough?" asked Mollie, teasingly, as together they turned the corner into the street where Betty lived.

"Is he coming to-night?" added Grace, with a chuckle.

"Since I can't answer both of you at once," Betty retorted, "I sha'n't answer you at all. There's mother on the porch," she added, to change the subject.

"And now," sighed Grace, happily, as they turned in at the walk of Betty's house, "just lead us to that apple pie."

While they ate pie and drank gratefully of the ice-cold ginger ale, Betty told her mother of Henry Blackford's cabin in the woods and explained to her the use they wished to make of it.

"It looks just providential to us," she finished, eagerly. "Mother, if you were so cruel as to say I couldn't go, I believe I'd take a running jump and land right in the middle of the lake."

Mrs. Nelson's eyes twinkled.

"Far be it from me to drive you to that, dear," she said. "I think the idea is a splendid one and you all ought to be very grateful to Mr. Blackford for suggesting it."

Whereupon Mrs. Nelson found herself promptly kissed by not only Betty, but the other girls as well. So sudden was the onslaught that she waved them away laughing and declaring it would take her a week at least to get back all the breath she had lost.

A few minutes later, having finished all the apple pie and ginger ale in sight, the girls started *en masse* for Mollie's house, to gain a like consent from Mollie's mother, the sprightly little French widow.

"And maybe," said Grace hopefully, as they neared the Billette home, "your mother has something in the refrigerator for us too, Mollie dear."

"Your appetite does you credit, Grace," said Mollie sarcastically. "But in the language of our day I must beg you not to kid yourself. If there ever was anything in the ice box, that dainty has been done away with by Dodo and Paul long ere this. So if you feel you need any further refreshment you'd better stop at the pastry shop and fortify yourself."

As they were at that moment passing the shop in question Grace gazed longingly into the pastry-filled windows, then as the girls watched her laughing, regretfully shook her head.

"Can't be done," she murmured sorrowfully. "Used up half my allowance already and only three days of the week gone."

"It surely gets me, Grace Ford," said Mollie, a trifle resentfully—for Mollie was gaining flesh a little too rapidly to suit her—"how you manage to eat sweets all day and still keep your sylph-like form."

"It's a gift," remarked Grace, with the sweet, superior smile that always made Mollie boil. "I sha'n't tell you the secret, Mollie darling, even if you did gain five pounds in two weeks."

"Didn't," retorted Mollie, with a frown. "It was only four and a half. I don't see why you always have to exaggerate everything."

"What's half a pound between friends?" returned Grace, airily.

Luckily they reached Mollie's home at this minute, which fact probably averted an exchange of blows, so Betty laughingly declared.

Mrs. Billette was at home and she listened rather absently to the girls' recital of what they hoped to do during the summer. Since at times they all talked at once it was small wonder that a rather bewildered expression grew in her eyes.

"You want to go camping in this cabin in the woods, which belong to Mr. Blackford, is that so?" she said at last, in her pretty accent. "Why, yes, I think it will be all right. You have learn' pretty well to take care of yourselves," she added, with an indulgent smile that for a moment chased the worried frown from her forehead. However, a sudden sharp sound, like the falling of a heavy body from above stairs, brought back the harassed expression to her face.

"Those children, Dodo and Paul!" she said,

wearily. "To-day they have nearly drive me wild. I wish you would take them with you into the woods, Mollie. It would be all right for them to run wild there. They could break nothing but their own heads."

"Which they would certainly do," said Mollie, with a wry little face. The idea of having her fun hampered by the mischievous antics of the twins was not a pleasant one.

At that moment there came a terrific bumping and thumping down the stairs and with one accord Mrs. Billette and the four girls rushed to the door.

"It is done at last!" wailed Mrs. Billette. "This time they have kill themselves!"

CHAPTER IV

MORE PLANS

But it would take more than a mere matter of falling downstairs to put an end to the activities of Dodo and Paul. This they proved themselves, by coming up smiling and chuckling and very much alive at the foot of the stairs.

"Oh, you will be the death of me yet, you li'l rascals," moaned Mrs. Billette, picking them up and feeling carefully over their small bodies to make sure that there were no bones broken. "I shall die of heart failure, if nothing else. Why will you not behave yourselves? Dodo, Paul, tell mother, are you hurt, darlings?"

Dodo and Paul regarded their mother and the girls in wide-eyed amazement at the fuss that was being made over them.

"Course, we're not hurt," said the little girl, rubbing a dimpled knee as though it had come in too hard contact with the edge of a stair. "Paul an' me, we was runnin' a race to see who could get downstairs first an' Paul got in the way——"

"Den she pushed me," said Paul, taking up the narrative in an injured tone. "I would have won de race only she pushed me. Wasn't fair—"

"Was too," interrupted Dodo, hotly. "You pushed me first, right up there at the head of the stairs an' so I pushed you too."

"Ooh," said Paul, his eyes wide and injured. "Dodo Billette what a big story-teller——"

"Paul," interrupted his mother sharply, "that will do. How many times have I told you that you must never call your little sister names?"

"Well, but she is," insisted the round-eyed Paul, whereat his exasperated parent pushed him gently but very very firmly toward the front door.

"There, go outside, both of you," she said. "And see if you can stop quarreling for five minutes. What have I done to have such terrible children!"

As the door closed upon the obstreperous twins she raised her hands in a typically French gesture and turned to the girls, despairingly.

"You see how it is," she said, leading the way once more into the cool peace of the living-room. "Not five minutes in the day do they give me peace. Sometime I think I shall go mad."

"Poor mother," said Mollie, putting her arm about the little woman and seating her in the

easiest chair in the room. "I know they're a dreadful pest, but just think how much worse it would be if you didn't have them. Remember the time when they were kidnapped——"

But Mrs. Billette stopped her with a quick gesture.

"Do not remind me of that!" she commanded, sharply. "Have I not done my best to forget that dreadful time? But you do well to speak of it, after all, Mollie," she said, more gently, patting Mollie's hand. "It make me more contented to bear with them. They are very little yet and it is natural for children to be always in mischief."

Those who are familiar with the Outdoor Girls will remember when the mischievous, adorable twins, Dodo and Paul, had been kidnapped by a villain who demanded an outrageous sum of money for their safe return and how the same twins had been rescued from a ship, wrecked on the rocks of Bluff Point near the cottage where the Outdoor Girls were summering. And it was true that whenever Mrs. Billette or Mollie were tempted to be impatient with the twins they remembered the despair of that dreadful time and dealt gently with the erring Dodo and Paul, aggravating little wretches that they could be.

"Just the same," said Grace as, a few hours

later, the girls started for home and dinner, "I'd just as soon leave the twins behind when we go on our vacation."

"Poor kiddies," said Betty, with a twinkle in her eye. "Just think how they would enjoy themselves!"

"Yes," retorted Grace, unmoved. "But just think how we would enjoy ourselves."

"Speaking of our vacation," said Mollie, who had agreed to walk as far as Betty's house with her. "It seems as though things were just about settled for one grand and glorious time."

"How about you, Grace?" asked Amy, as they paused at the corner before separating for their respective domiciles. "Do you suppose your folks will give you the O.K.?"

"Amy, what slang!" chuckled Betty. "If we don't look out, you'll be giving us points."

"Impossible," retorted Amy, at which Betty grinned still more.

"Why, yes, I guess," said Grace, in reply to Amy's question. "The folks will let me go anywhere as long as Will comes along."

"Good gracious, are we going to let the boys in on this?" asked Mollie, wide-eyed.

"Did you ever know of a time we were able to keep the boys out—altogether?" retorted Grace, favoring Mollie with a pitying glance. "We've

tried it, haven't we?" she added, as Mollie still stared at her.

"We-ell, not very hard," said Betty, impishly, and, looking at her, the girls had to laugh.

"You're enough to demoralize anybody, Betty Nelson," said Mollie, giving her a hug. "You won't even let us pretend we don't want the boys."

"I don't see why we should pretend," said Amy, boldly, flushing as the girls turned their laughing eyes upon her. "We always have a lot better time with them," she persisted, and the Little Captain hugged her impulsively.

"Of course we do. Don't let 'em tell you different," she said gayly, then turned decidedly on her heel. "I don't know about the rest of you," she flung back at them over her shoulder, "but I do know I've got to be getting home. Mother will think I'm lost. Coming, Mollie?"

And so they parted, promising to get together on the morrow for a grand "pow-wow" and to make definite plans for their outing.

"Is Allen coming to-night, Betty?" asked Mollie of the Little Captain, as they stopped before Betty's door.

"He said he was," said Betty, lightly, adding ruefully: "And he left before I had a chance to contradict him."

"Which of course you wanted to do," teased Mollie, adding, soberly: "Have you noticed anything unusual about Allen, Betty?"

Betty looked startled, but her answer sounded indifferent enough.

"I haven't had much of a chance to notice anything about him lately," she said, but sharp little Mollie was not one whit deceived.

"He's got something on his mind," she said, thoughtfully. "Once or twice I've met him on the street and he was in such a hurry going somewhere that he didn't even notice me. The last time I called after him and he stopped and apologized for not seeing me, just like a gentleman. But for all that, he was in a dreadfully big hurry to get away."

"Just busy, I guess," said Betty, adding, as she answered her mother's call from within the house: "He's getting to be terribly popular, you know."

Although Betty had denied that she had noticed any change in Allen, in her own heart she knew that she had, and wondered what could be the matter. She ate her dinner absently and hurried through her dessert—it was a good one, too, plum cake with hard sauce—so that she might "pretty" herself before Allen arrived.

As she brushed her dark curls into some sem-

blance of order and regarded her flushed face in the mirror over her pretty dressing table, Betty reflected whimsically.

"And I was wondering," she said, a little quirk at the corners of her mouth, "whether I should see him or not. It would really be better if I didn't. It might teach him that he can't stay away for a whole week without even 'phoning—" She paused and regarded her image thoughtfully.

Then, with a smile, she patted the last unruly lock of hair into place and went over to her closet to select the prettiest gown she had.

"And all the time," she mused, "I knew I'd see him. I had to when he spoke in that tone. And he knew it too. Well," with a sigh, "there isn't any use worrying over it, I suppose."

The dress she took from the hook was a fluffy organdie of that popular and becoming color known as "American beauty." And when Betty slipped it over her dark head and stood once more before the mirror, the color of it miraculously matched the color in her cheeks. Betty—and the Little Captain was not at all conceited—was well satisfied with the effect.

Before she had quite finished putting the last touches to her pretty toilet she heard Allen talking and laughing with her father on the porch.

"It's a wonder," she thought, resentfully, "that

he can spare any time at all from that old business of his. I wonder," she added, inconsistently, "if he will like my dress."

As a matter of fact, it is doubtful if Allen really saw the dress at all. For he was staring straight at Betty and no dress, however lovely, could compete with Betty's face when she looked as she looked to-night.

Mr. Nelson, enjoying an after-dinner cigar, noted the direction of the young lawyer's glance and chuckled to himself. He liked Allen Washburn very much, and, strange as it may seem, he liked his pretty daughter even better. So it is very easy to see that everybody was happy.

After a while, like a very thoughtful and obliging parent, he went inside, ostensibly to play the phonograph, but really to ask proudly of his wife if Betty wasn't the prettiest thing she ever saw.

To which Mrs. Nelson replied, that, though she hadn't seen Betty yet to-night, she would agree, just on general principles, that she was.

"And the best of it is," added the woman, softly, "Betty doesn't know how lovely she is. She is just as sweet and unspoiled as she was at ten."

"Let's hope that she will always be so," replied Betty's father, gravely.

Meanwhile, out on the porch the last warm rays of the sun had given place to the soft summer twilight and Allen brought his chair closer to Betty's so that he might watch the expression on her face. She was smiling a little, as though enjoying some joke that he could not share and he wondered if she were going to let him be serious. It was very seldom that she did.

"Are you laughing at me?" he asked, suddenly.

Betty's face became, on the instant, demurely grave.

"How could you think it?" she murmured, looking up at him innocently. "What is there funny about you, Allen?"

"A good many things, I've come to believe," answered Allen, ruefully. "At least, every time I see you, you seem amused."

"I haven't been amused very much lately then, have I?" she murmured, and once more Allen began to look savage.

"Stop it!" he said, and Betty looked at him, wide-eyed. Her mirth nearly bubbled over.

"Were you speaking to me?" she asked, and then at the look on his face she began to laugh and the more savage he looked the more she laughed.

Allen got up and walked to the other end of

the porch. A moment later Betty's voice, still choked with laughter, reached him.

"Allen, don't be a goose," she said. "Come here and talk to me. I won't laugh. Truly I won't."

Allen came, still forbidding, and sat down beside her. He was quiet so long that she finally reopened the conversation.

"What's the matter, Allen?" she asked, gently. "Are you worried about anything?"

At her changed tone he turned to her eagerly.

"Will you listen to me without laughing?"

There was a sparkle in Betty's eyes but her lips were grave.

"Yes, anything you say," she said, meekly.

Allen looked suspicious, but he went on, just the same.

"There *is* something on my mind," he said, so gravely that immediately Betty became grave too. "I'd like to tell you, little Betty, and then maybe you will realize why I haven't been able to come around lately."

"Tell me," said Betty, softly.

CHAPTER V

THE MATTER OF A WILL

ALLEN paused a moment, his hands clasped on his knees, his eyes thoughtfully upon them.

"I have a client," he said at last. "He's an old, old man. Though he retained me a week ago, it was only to-day that I was able to persuade him to put his last will and testament into writing. Poor fellow, he seems to have had a horror all his life of making a will. Thought that the moment he did, it would be the signing of his death warrant."

In spite of the warm evening breeze Betty shuddered.

"I don't wonder," she said. "A will has always seemed a horrid thing to me."

"But a very necessary one," Allen reminded her. "The old fellow has considerable of this world's goods and since he can't hope to take them with him where he's going, it's only sensible to dispose of them justly before he goes."

"Oh," said Betty, pityingly. "Is he dying, Allen?"

The young lawyer nodded soberly.

"And his dying isn't the most pitiful thing about it," he said. "Everybody has to make up his mind to die sometime and he has lived longer than most. But what worries me," he paused and the frown deepened, "is that he has something on his mind that, it seems, he can't bring himself to confide to anybody. Even the will that he drew up to-day isn't final—or at least, I judged that it wasn't by the fact that he told me to come back to-morrow."

"You think he wants to change his will?" asked Betty, puzzled. "I wonder why."

"If I knew that," said Allen, with a sudden smile, "I'd know everything, most likely. The other day when he was out of his head—but there," he checked himself, drawing himself up short as though he were about to say too much, "I can't betray the confidence of a client. Not that he's given me his confidence to any marked extent," he finished with a rueful smile.

Betty was quiet for a moment, thinking over what he had said. She knew Allen well enough to be sure that he had not told her everything he knew. That, as he said, would be to betray the confidence of a client.

There was something very pathetic in the thought of the aged man dying with something

on his conscience, a misdeed possibly, perhaps an injustice to some innocent person, and unable even in his extremity, poor stubborn old fellow, to confess.

"Suppose, Allen—" she said suddenly. "Suppose he dies without making a confession?"

Allen shrugged his shoulders.

"That's probably what he will do," he answered. "And in that case the mystery—if there is one—will die with him."

"It's a pity," said the Little Captain thoughtfully. "I wish we could do something to help him."

"Well," said Allen, turning to her with a queer little smile on his lips, "it's just like you to wish that. But if I were you I wouldn't pity the old codger too much. I reckon he's been a pretty hard man in his day."

Allen's lips tightened, and again Betty thought that there was something more behind his words than he was free to tell her. She saw also that the matter of this queer old man and his will had taken a great hold upon him. There surely must be some mystery. Allen was not one to let himself get wrought up about nothing.

"I like that red thing," said Allen, suddenly, and Betty, looking at him, surprised, saw that he meant her dress.

She laughed and made an impudent little face at him.

"Thanks," she said. "But it isn't red. It's American beauty."

"Same thing," said he, with masculine indifference to names. "It's pretty anyway. I say, Betty," after a pause, during which Betty's gaze had been steadily averted from him, "am I forgiven?"

"For what?" she asked, knowing perfectly well what he meant.

"For staying away. You know I wouldn't have done it if I could have helped it."

"I know that," replied Betty, and then, as he leaned closer, went on hurriedly: "I've something to tell you, too. We're going camping this summer."

"We? Whom do you mean by we?" he asked, laughing.

"Whom should I mean?" retorted Betty. "Us Outdoor Girls, of course."

"Oh, then I'm not invited——"

"If you want to come——"

"Betty——"

"Allen, if you won't be sensible, I'll—I'll have to send you home, that's all."

At which threat Allen subsided, though Betty had an idea it would not be for long. She hur-

ried on to tell him about the cabin at Rainbow Lake and the young lawyer was very much interested.

"Ought to be no end of fun," he said. "I suppose you'll wear sporting suits and sit around the campfire at night and fight off the wild animals——"

"There aren't any wild animals," protested Betty.

"I'm sure you're mistaken," disputed Allen, earnestly. "I've heard there are no end of man-eating critters around there. You'll need some strong men—one strong man, at least—to protect you."

"Don't know any," retorted Betty, flippantly, at which Allen only laughed indulgently.

"You just think you don't," he said.

And after awhile Mrs. Nelson called down, wanting to know if Allen had the correct time, and Allen, taking the hint, said good-by—or rather, he started to say good-by. To be exact, it took Betty just ten minutes by the clock to shoo him off the porch.

And after he was gone Betty sighed and looked up at the moon.

"It's just ten-thirty," she thought resentfully. "They might have let him stay a little longer!"

As they had agreed, the girls met the next day

to make definite arrangements for their trip. Since the distance was only a few miles to the upper end of Rainbow Lake and they could go by water all the way, they decided to go in the *Gem.*

When Allen, a few nights later, heard of their decision he protested strenuously. Since the day the girls had so nearly collided with the *General Pershing* he had had a dread of letting Betty go anywhere in the motor boat.

However, as the girls had no idea whatever of allowing him to spoil their plans, they finally talked him down.

"The idea!" said Mollie, indignantly. "If you had seen Betty handle the boat that day you wouldn't be afraid to let her go anywhere. I bet there isn't one of you boys who could have done as well."

As the three other boys, as well as Allen, were present, they protested vehemently, and it was an hour or more before quiet was restored.

However, it was eventually decided that the girls were to have their way, leaving for Rainbow Lake in about a week. A few days later, the boys would join them, bringing their tent and camping paraphernalia.

They were all tremendously excited over the plan, and the time they had set for the start

seemed awfully far away. However, as Grace insisted she could not go a step without the right kind of clothing—she wanted one of the latest knicker suits—and since she was sure she could get a smarter outfit in Kayford, a neighboring town, than she could in Deepdale, the other girls were finally argued into agreeing to the delay.

"But one thing I do know," Betty said at last. "If you go to Kayford for a knicker suit, we're all going to Kayford too, and for the same purpose."

"Suits me," Grace had drawled. "We can go in Mollie's car."

And so it came about that on one fine morning a day or two later the Outdoor Girls climbed merrily into Mollie's six and departed for Kayford.

It was a gorgeous day and the girls' spirits matched the weather. It was always fun to go shopping anyway, and under the present circumstances it promised to be even more fun than usual.

Mollie's car was running in fine form and it fairly ate up the miles between Deepdale and Kayford. They glided into the main street well before noon.

"We've plenty of time to shop before lunch," cried Betty gayly. "And then we can go to that

new little tea shop and get something good. I think I'll have some chicken à la king."

"Hear the child!" sighed Grace. "And it's one whole hour to lunch time."

Half of that hour they spent in buying knicker suits that fairly made them ache for the woods, if only for the joy of wearing them. Then, when they no longer had any excuse for lingering in the fascinating shop, they sauntered down Main Street toward the little restaurant of which Betty had spoken, looking in the store windows as they went.

As they were passing the Woman's Exchange, Betty suddenly stopped and uttered a cry of delight.

"Girls," she cried, going nearer to the show windows, as though drawn there irresistibly, "look at those embroideries. Did you ever see anything so perfectly stunning in your lives?"

CHAPTER VI

THE LITTLE OLD LADY

Lured by the lovely, hand-embroidered centerpieces and doilies in the window, the girls entered the Woman's Exchange.

"I'm going to see those stunning things close to," declared Betty.

"I wonder if they are really hand-made," said Amy, and Mollie sniffed.

"If they're not, then I never saw a hand-made article in my life," she said, positively.

"But that drawn-work!" marveled Grace. "I don't see how it could be done by hand."

"It looks to me like Danish embroidery," said the Little Captain, thoughtfully. "Mother had a Danish maid once and she used to do the most exquisite embroidery I've ever seen."

Upon inquiry they found that the embroideries were on the second floor of the building.

Dainty things of all sorts and descriptions lined the glass-fronted shelves—exquisite baby clothes and filmy dresses for older children, to say nothing of lovely things that would have

fitted well in the wardrobes of the Outdoor Girls themselves.

"Oh, for a million dollars!" sighed Mollie, her eyes as wistful as a starving puppy when he sees a bone. "I believe I could spend it all without moving from this spot."

"What good would those pretty things do us now?" Betty argued, reasonably. "We couldn't possibly wear them on a camping trip. Come on, I see those embroideries over there."

She half-dragged, half-led the reluctant girls over to the counter where reposed such exquisite creations of the embroiderers' art that the girls fairly caught their breath.

A young woman hovered suggestively close to them, hoping, no doubt, to make a sale, but it was a long time before they realized her presence.

They handled the lovely things lovingly, exclaiming over them in awed tones.

"Wouldn't mother like to have this centerpiece!" said Grace, softly. "I wish now I hadn't spent so much of my allowance."

"And this luncheon set," sighed Betty, ecstatically, holding up a doily of such rare design and exquisite workmanship that it seemed more the fabric of a dream than anything else. "My birthday is coming pretty soon. I wonder if anybody here is bright enough to take a hint."

"Rather give it to you for a wedding present," suggested Mollie, wickedly.

Betty said nothing, merely bending closer over the lovely thing she held in her hand.

"I do believe it's Danish work," she said, and at that moment the alert young saleswoman spoke up.

"You're right, Miss," she said, looking as proud as though she herself were the maker of the luncheon set. "It is Danish embroidery of the finest sort—and hand work, every stitch of it. I've seen fine work in my day, but nothing that could equal that."

"I believe you," murmured Betty, adding, with a quick, upward look: "Do you happen to know the person who does this work?"

"Yes, indeed," said the young woman briskly. It had been a slow morning and she was glad of the chance to talk to sympathetic listeners. "An old lady she was—as quaint an old soul as I ever saw. We were quite fond of her around here. Every Saturday morning she used to come in, often with some new piece, prettier than the last, to sell."

"Why do you say she 'used to come?' " asked Amy, gently. "Doesn't she come any more?"

The young woman shook her head and a frown puckered her forehead.

"No, Miss, she doesn't. And the worst of it is we don't know what has become of her."

"Didn't you know where she lived?" asked Betty, with interest.

Again the young woman shook her head.

"Nor yet can we find anybody who does," she said. "She was a queer old soul and she came and went as quietly as a mouse."

"And you don't even know her name?" asked Mollie, idly.

"No, Miss. You see," the girl went on, warming to her subject, "she had been coming here so long with her beautiful work that we'd come to think of her as part of the Exchange—like a door, or something—somebody who would always be here. And we none of us knew how fond we were of the gentle old soul until she failed to show up. Even then we thought she'd turn up in a week or two, but she didn't. We think now that maybe she's dead. She was very old and feeble."

"Too bad," said Betty, her warm heart instantly touched. "Do you sell many of these?" she added, touching a piece of embroidery.

"Not so many," returned the clerk. "You see the work is so rare that we have to charge a pretty good price for it. People come here and say how beautiful it is—and go away. And yet we

can't honestly sell it for any less. We promised the old lady a pretty good price for it, you see. It's worth it."

"Oh, dear," murmured Grace, petulantly. "How unfortunate."

"What's the matter, now?" asked the Little Captain, politely.

"Oh," said Grace, replacing the centerpiece she had been studying upon a little pile of pieces, "I had my mind set on buying that for mother's birthday, but if it's so very expensive I guess I can't."

"We might make a special price for you," said the young saleswoman obligingly, and straightway they fell to bartering while the other girls moved away to study other articles of interest on the floor.

"I feel sorry for that old woman," said Amy, absently staring at some filmy embroidered handkerchiefs. "It must be pretty bad to be old and friendless——"

"Well, I don't see much use in our worrying about it," said Mollie, briskly.

"There's Grace with the centerpiece under her arm," chuckled Betty. "Wonder how she did it."

"By pretty near breaking herself I suppose,"

said Mollie, adding ruefully: "What do you bet we have to treat her to lunch?"

But both Amy and Betty were too wise to bet on anything so sure to go against them, and in this way they proved their shrewdness. Once outside the store Grace confessed, not at all shamefacedly, that after buying the centerpiece the entire extent of her resources was twenty-five cents.

"That," said Betty, with a twinkle, "will just about buy you one sandwich."

"Have a heart," protested Grace. "The way I feel one sandwich would just about whet my appetite."

"Well, girls, I suppose we can't see her starve," sighed Betty, as they entered the tempting little tea shop, all white tables and blue walls.

"A blight on our soft hearts," murmured Mollie, at which Betty and Amy giggled and Grace smiled sweetly. And the way she ordered from the delectable dishes on the menu, one might have been excused for thinking that Grace herself was treating to the luncheon.

"All right," grumbled Mollie, as she prepared to cut into her chicken patty. "You just wait, Grace Ford. Next time we come here all of us girls are accidentally going to forget our pocketbooks. That ought to fix you."

"Let the future take care of itself," said Grace, airily. "Just at present I'm having a lovely time!"

After lunch they thought of some more shopping they had to do—mostly for things which they needed on their trip—so that it was late afternoon before they reached Deepdale once more.

As Mollie stopped the car before Grace's door to let her get out, she handed her a paper parcel containing the precious centerpiece which Grace had overlooked.

"Don't forget anything," said Mollie, with elaborate politeness. "And don't forget—next time is your treat!"

"I envy your mother, Gracie," Betty called after her, as Mollie started the motor. "I reckon she has a happy birthday."

Amy's house was the next stop and on the way Betty remarked how quiet the girl was.

"What's the matter, Amy dear?" she asked, curiously. "You act as if you had lost your last friend."

Amy shook off her thoughtful mood and smiled.

"I suppose you'll think I'm foolish," she said, a bit shyly. "But I just can't get that old lady out of my mind—the one who does the embroidery."

"Listen, Amy," remarked Mollie, screwing

around in her seat until the girl came within her range of vision, "if we should feel bad about every poor unfortunate person in this world, we would all be joy killers. So stop worrying."

"I suppose so," sighed Amy, but the troubled look did not leave her eyes.

"I'd hate to have Amy's conscience," chuckled Mollie to Betty, after they had left Amy at her door. "She's a darling, of course, but she makes herself no end of trouble worrying about other people. If she could help any by worrying, it would be different."

Betty nodded, but her eyes also were thoughtful.

In a few minutes she was standing on her porch waving good-by to Mollie as the big car sped up the block and turned the corner.

"What a perfect day it's been," she sighed, as she turned to enter the house. "I do wish everybody could be as happy as we girls are." By this it may be seen that the Little Captain, like Amy, was still thinking of the little old lady who sold embroideries through the Woman's Exchange.

CHAPTER VII

THE DEATH OF A CLIENT

The next few days were crowded with final preparations for the trip. Although the girls had assured themselves that there would be "nothing to do" to get ready, they found, as usual, that there was a great deal more to do than they had counted on.

But at last everything was ready, the last utensil packed, and the last "canned heat" can crammed into its appointed place. The *Gem* had been overhauled by loving hands, its decks "swabbed" and its brasses scoured till they shone like gold.

And as they stood regarding their work and realized that at last everything was finished, Mollie proposed that they all come over to her house that evening for a little farewell party, they being scheduled to start early the following morning.

"The party will be very exclusive," Mollie declared, "including only the four boys and our four selves."

"And we'll shoo the boys home early," said Betty, preparatory to hurrying home for a hasty dinner. "If we hope to get a reasonably good start in the morning Grace will have to be in bed by eleven."

At this direct insult Grace drew herself up haughtily.

"Speak for yourself, old dear," she said, at which the girls chuckled derisively, thus adding insult to injury.

And so came the evening and with it three of the boys in fine spirits and ready for "a bang-up time," as they expressed it. There was only one thing that checked the hilarity, and that was Allen's absence.

Although she tried to join in the fun as if nothing was amiss, Betty's eyes constantly wandered to the door and she grew anxious as the time passed and still no Allen appeared.

Finally Mollie cornered her and asked a question.

"Didn't Allen say he'd be here, honey?" she asked, with a glance at the clock.

"He said he might be a little late," interrupted Frank Haley, who had overheard the question. "Said he had a little business to attend to."

"Mighty busy chap, Allen, these days," added Roy, admiringly. "If his reputation grows much

bigger I guess this little town won't be able to hold him."

"Oh, bother work," said Mollie, crossly. "Who wants to work, anyway, when they might have a good time?"

"I guess he doesn't want to," Betty spoke up, gravely, and as though they realized that there was something behind her words they looked at her expectantly.

"Hand us the news, Betty," commanded Roy.

"He's drawing up a will for an old man who doesn't seem to know his own mind," replied Betty promptly. "As soon as he draws up a will he tears it up and sets to work making another one."

"Lots of fun for Allen," commented Grace. "I should think he'd tell the old man to get another lawyer."

"Guess he'd rather do it himself," said Betty, her eyes once more wandering to the door. "You see he thinks he's got wind of some mystery connected with his crusty client, and you know what Allen is when he smells a mystery."

"Regular old sleuth-hound," agreed Will Ford, with a grin. "Always told Allen he should have been a detective instead of a no-'count lawyer. Don't look at me that way, Betty. I promise never to do it again."

As a matter of fact Betty had not looked at him at all, being too busy watching the door. But she did look at him now, just long enough to send him one withering glance.

"Well, all I have to say is," said Mollie, indignantly, "that if Allen passes up my perfectly good party, just for the sake of drawing up a worthless old will, then all I say is——"

"Say it to my face, woman, say it to my face," commanded a laughing voice, and Allen stepped into the room.

Mollie giggled and promptly forgot to be indignant.

"You know what I think of eavesdroppers, don't you?" she countered, and Allen grinned.

"I wasn't," he said. "I could hear your voice raised in anger, fair maid, all the way down to the corner."

"Goodness, I didn't know it was as penetrating as all that," she said, adding, with an hospitable wave of her hand: "Come in, stranger, come in. Hang up your hat and make yourself at home."

"Thanks," returned Allen, and was immediately the center of merry bantering.

"How is our famous sleuth this evening?" queried Frank. "Have you run the villain to earth or is he still running?"

"Give us the inside stuff, old boy," urged Roy,

leaning forward confidentially. "Has the old gentleman left you all his money or only a couple of millions? Don't be close, old man. Remember, we're all your friends."

"I doubt it," retorted Allen, and over the heads of the "rabble" exchanged a glance with Betty. "I judge from your remarks," he said then, "that Betty has told you about my mysterious old client and his taste in wills." His voice lowered and his face took on the grave look which it so often wore of late. "The poor old man has made his last will. He is dead."

A silence fell upon them all and they felt suddenly and solemnly depressed. Death, even the death of a stranger, is not a thing to be taken lightly.

Mollie was the first to rally.

"I don't see why you should tell us about it," she said, reproachfully. "Didn't you know it would spoil our party?"

"I don't know why it should," said Allen, shaking off the thoughtful mood with an effort. "None of you knew the old man and we can't help him any by glooming. I reckon he's happier now than he has been for a good while, anyway."

They all felt, as Betty had felt the night when Allen had first spoken to her about his client,

that he knew a great deal more than he was at liberty to talk about, and though, their curiosity aroused, they pressed him for details, they soon found that the attempt was useless. When Allen once made up his mind not to talk, wild horses could not draw another word from him.

But this did not keep them from wondering considerably what Allen knew about the queer old man and why he would not talk to them of what he knew.

But as the evening wore on they gradually forgot everything but the good time they were having—all that is, but Allen and one other. That other was the Little Captain.

Underneath Allen's forced gayety she saw that he was grave, that something was on his mind, and she longed to help him. But Allen guessed nothing of this. As he watched Betty, laughing and gay, the center of all the fun, as she always was, it was little wonder he did not guess how serious her thoughts were. He was a little resentful, too, because he had so little chance to be near her.

When they danced and he started for Betty it seemed as though everybody in the room got in his way and one of the other boys whisked her off beneath his very nose.

"Too slow, Allen," Roy called once, as he

whirled the Little Captain off to the music. "You think you're popular, but I'll say Betty can give you points."

Allen grunted and made for the seclusion of Mollie's side porch. He wasn't in the mood for music and dancing anyway, and as for Betty, she did not seem to know he was in the world.

Lost in gloomy reflection he was startled by a light touch on his shoulder. He looked up to see Betty herself smiling impishly down at him. He caught her hand and drew her down on the couch beside him. It—the couch—was a wicker one of the porch furniture variety and a more uncomfortable object to sit on could hardly be imagined. However, if either Betty or Allen was uncomfortable, neither of them noticed the fact.

"So you did notice me hanging around on the outskirts of the crowd," he reproached her, adding with a sigh: "My, but it's good to get you out here away from all that."

By "that" he evidently meant the music and Betty leaned forward, her brow a little puckered.

"You're worrying about that poor old man who died to-night. I know it!" she said, adding before he could interrupt: "Is there anything you can tell me, Allen, just to get it off your mind? I'd like to help if you'd let me."

Allen covered her hand with his and for just a moment she let him do it.

"I'd tell you if I could tell any one," he said gratefully. "You know that, Betty. But I can't say any more just now."

"Then come in and dance," said Betty, jumping to her feet in one of her swift changes of mood. "We can't stay out here, you know."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Well, it isn't being done," said Betty whimsically, adding, with apparent innocence: "Listen, that's a waltz, isn't it? Frank just loves to waltz with me!"

"You little wretch!" laughed Allen, as he followed her into the brightly lighted room.

CHAPTER VIII

STARTING ADVENTURE

THE girls awoke next morning to a day that seemed just made for them. The air was balmy and unusually cool for that time of the year. The sun shone brightly and there was not a cloud to spoil the even blue of the sky.

The boys had agreed to carry their luggage for them down to the dock. As the latter consisted of a few blankets, with utensils and some other small and necessary articles wrapped snuggly inside, the burden would not be great.

They had laid in quite a stock of canned goods, bacon, and other foodstuffs which they had already stowed away in the *Gem.*

"I hope some tramp doesn't take it into his head to investigate," Betty had said the day before, when they were leaving the little boat. "If so, we might find ourselves minus provisions."

"At the worst, we could always buy more," Mollie had retorted, and the matter had dropped there.

Since Henry Blackford's cabin would serve them for ample shelter the girls had no need for a tent or for tent furnishings. This had, of course, simplified their preparations considerably.

According to Amy's brother, there was a good oil stove in the cabin, also several utensils. However, as the girls had no way of knowing what condition these utensils were in, they preferred to furnish their own.

It had been arranged the night before that, promptly at seven-thirty the next morning, Allen was to repair to Betty's house, Frank Haley to Mollie's, Roy to Amy's. Will Ford was taking down his sister's luggage.

Although Grace had argued that seven-thirty was an unheard of hour to start and absolutely unnecessary, considering the short distance they had to go, she had been ruled down by a majority of three to one.

"It's always more fun to start early," Betty had declared, adding: "And you never know what trouble we may run into. If anything should happen to the engine it might take some time to get it going again."

"And we want to get to camp while it's light enough to do plenty of exploring," Mollie had finished, resolutely.

Just the same, Betty, excited and flushed with

a sense of adventure, standing on her front porch waiting for Allen the next morning, was not at all sure that Grace would be true to her promise.

"If she keeps us waiting this morning——" she began, to break off as she saw Allen coming at a swift pace up the street.

"Hello," he called, his eyes lighting up as he spied Betty. "Where did you get the new togs? My, but you look great!"

"Thanks," said the Little Captain, demurely, glancing down at the trim tweed of the knicker suit she had bought in Kayford. "I rather like me, myself."

And then they laughed together, merrily and for no particular reason except that it was the kind of day which seems just made for laughing.

On the way down to the dock where the *Gem* lay rocking in the gentle swell from the river, they were still gay. But when they reached the pier and found that they were the first to arrive, Allen became suddenly grave.

"Somehow I don't like the idea of your going to this lonely cabin all alone," he said, as, under Betty's instructions, he disposed of the small blanket roll in the stern of the *Gem*. "There may be tramps up there."

"Yes," retorted Betty gayly. "And there may

be wild elephants too, and cyclones or maybe an earthquake. Anything may happen, but I've a strong hunch it isn't going to."

"Just the same, I'll feel better when we fellows get up there with you."

"You're coming then, Allen?" she asked, quickly. "Do you think you can leave your horrid old clients long enough?"

"Long enough for week-ends, anyway," said Allen, with a smile, adding soberly: "It's going to be mighty lonesome down here without you."

"Oh, well, you'll always have your work," said Betty, wickedly. It was not a fair remark at all and she knew it was not. She had seen the boys and girls coming down the street which led to the dock and a moment later they were completely surrounded, leaving Allen not one chance to retort.

Every one was joyful, even Grace—which was unusual at this early hour—and they got under way amid a bombardment of persiflage from the boys.

As the motor of the *Gem* began its rhythmic putt-putt, Roy began to sing in a far from melodious voice "The Boys They Left Behind Them." The others joined in, ending the song in a joyful shout.

Just before they passed out of earshot Allen

made a megaphone of his hands and shouted something which only Betty understood.

"I'll get even yet," he yelled, and for answer Betty waved a mocking hand.

"Now what have you been doing to him?" asked Grace, adding virtuously: "I think it's a shame the way you treat that poor boy, Betty Nelson. You never give him an easy moment. Dancing so much with Frank last night, for instance. I could see murder in Allen's eye."

"Just the same," remarked Mollie as the *Gem* gathered speed and they left the shore further and further behind them, "I notice he always comes back for more. You must admit, Grace dear, that Betty has a way with her."

"Altogether too much so," said Grace, with a sigh. "When she's around none of the rest of us has a chance."

"Don't mind me, ladies," chuckled Betty. "I'm not listening."

"You don't have to," said Mollie, the ever-generous. "You know it anyway, without our telling you. All the boys are crazy about you——"

"Even Percy Falconer," murmured Grace, and Betty wrinkled up her pretty little nose.

"Why spoil a perfect morning by mentioning

Percy?" she inquired. "I should think you'd know better, Gracie."

Percy Falconer, a native of Deepdale, was a fast and fatuous young man with more money than brains. He was a dandy with a liking for the extreme in style, and on several occasions had attempted to ingratiate himself with Betty. However, Betty had always managed to discourage his budding attentions, and usually in a manner most discomforting to Percy. It goes without saying that the youth was a standing joke with the girls.

"I hear Percy isn't going with that fast crowd any more," spoke up gentle Amy. "Maybe he's reformed."

"Well," remarked Mollie, her nose in the air, "I'll say he can stand a good bit of it."

For a while everything went well with the girls and they were beginning to see visions of getting to camp in time to cook luncheon when suddenly something went wrong with the *Gem's* engine. It did not go dead, but there was a queer note in its putt-putting that worried Betty.

As they were passing Triangle Island—one of the many picturesque islands which dotted the Argono River—Grace suggested that they run into shore while Mollie and Betty "looked the engine over."

"Be sure you say Mollie and Betty," snorted Mollie. "What's the matter with your 'looking the engine over?'"

"I'd feel sorry for the engine," chuckled Betty, and even Grace joined in the laugh at her expense.

Having visited the island before, Betty knew the very spot where conditions were best for landing. This was a little inlet from the river, deep enough to allow the *Gem* to come close to shore.

As soon as they came near enough Grace and Amy grasped the overhanging branches of trees and swung themselves to firm ground, leaving Betty and Mollie in the boat to do the "dirty work."

After considerable tinkering Betty announced that they were ready to start again but so much time had passed in the operation that Amy and Grace declared they were starving, despite the fact that it was not yet twelve o'clock.

"This is the best place ever for lunch," Grace argued. "And we had our breakfast so early I really think we need something to eat."

As the girls had thoughtfully brought along a picnic lunch in case they were not able to reach camp till later in the afternoon, Betty and Mollie brought it to light and then scrambled nimbly on to shore, the Little Captain with a rope in

her hand with which she intended to fasten the boat to some sort of mooring.

"It would be a great thing, wouldn't it," she said, as she wound the rope about a stout tree and tied a seamanlike knot in it, "to wake up and find the *Gem* sailing out to sea with us marooned on a desert isle?"

"More thrilling in the movies than in real life," drawled Grace. "Now let's get busy, girls. I'm starved."

"Oh, not down here," Betty protested. "I know of a perfect duck of a place on the other side of the hill up there—flat rock for a table and everything."

"But the boat!" protested Amy. "Suppose it should——"

"Now don't go imagining things," interrupted Betty, gayly slipping an arm through Amy's and drawing her upward. "The *Gem* couldn't get away from her moorings if she tried. Trust your aunt Elizabeth."

They found the "perfect duck of a place" Betty had mentioned and all agreed that she had not said half enough for it. There was the great flat rock surrounded by mossy grass and on the rock they spread their lunch while they plumped to the soft and yielding ground with signs of content.

"We're as alone as though we were at the end of the world," said Grace, contentedly munching a sandwich. "I wouldn't change places with the King of England just now."

"I don't suppose many people come here, except to picnic like us," said Amy, and then sat up suddenly as though she had heard something.

Betty made a grab for a glass of crabapple jelly which had almost been upset by Amy's sudden motion.

"What's the matter, Amy?" asked Grace, lazily. "You look like a scared jack rabbit."

Amy made a motion for silence.

"I heard a noise," she said, with an uneasy glance over her shoulder. "It was like some one stealing through the woods. Oh, girls!"

CHAPTER IX

TRAMPS

Of course the other girls laughed at Amy, as they usually did at her "imaginings."

"Maybe it was a squirrel——" began Mollie.

"Planning to attack us from the rear," finished Betty.

"Or perhaps it was only a cricket chirping in the tree," drawled Grace, biting into her third sandwich with relish.

"Chumps, all of you," said Amy, in mild disgust, while the girls giggled enjoyably. "You can make fun all you like, but I know I heard somebody."

"Well, suppose you did?" asked Betty, easily. "Maybe some summer picnickers like ourselves, seeking a cozy spot wherein to dine."

"Maybe," said Amy, doubtfully, sticking to her point with unusual stubbornness. "But picnickers wouldn't go sneaking around, spying on us, would they?"

"Oh, Amy dear, desist," begged Grace, lazily. "We came here for lunch, not melodrama."

"Well, have it your own way," retorted Amy, feeling a bit abused by the general lack of belief. "But don't be surprised if, when we get back to the water, we find the *Gem* gone."

Betty sat up, startled. The next moment she was briskly gathering together the remains of the lunch.

"What's the great hurry?" protested Grace. "Here, come back with that sandwich, Betty Nelson. It's only half eaten."

"Your hard luck, old dear," said Betty, unfeelingly, adding, as she scrambled to her feet and brushed away the remaining crumbs: "I don't know whether Amy was dreaming or not, but I've got a hankering to get back to the *Gem*, all the same."

Mollie got to her feet, eyeing the Little Captain curiously.

"Amy got you scared?" she queried.

"Not scared—just curious," retorted Betty, as she led the way back toward the spot where they had left the motor boat.

Amy and Mollie followed close behind her, leaving Grace to arrange her hair with the aid of a tiny mirror she always managed to have somewhere about her person.

So it came to pass that, a few seconds later, she was startled by the sound of voices lifted

"PLEASE GET OUT OF OUR BOAT," SAID BETTY.

angrily. She scrambled to her feet, thrust the mirror hastily into the pocket of her jacket, and made after the girls.

Coming in sight of the *Gem* she witnessed a most amazing tableau. There, sprawling on the deck of the pretty boat, lazily taking their ease in the pleasant sunshine, were two men. By their ragged clothing and the two weeks' growth of beard on their faces they were easily classed as tramps of the most unpleasant order.

One was short and fat, red of countenance, with a bald head and black, beady eyes that made Grace think of a canary bird. The second was a tall, lanky fellow with a long, lantern-jawed face and a cruel thin-lipped mouth.

Grace thought her heart would stop beating. In a moment, the unpleasant truth flashed upon her. They were alone on this remote island with two disreputable men who might be, probably were, desperate characters.

Wide-eyed, she looked at the Little Captain. What would she do? Betty was not long in answering that question.

Her little nose was up in the air and her eyes looked black as they flashed at the men.

"Please get out of our boat at once," she said in a voice that was deadly quiet. "You have no right there and you know it."

"Findin's keepin's, lady," returned the fat tramp in an oily voice. "We're havin' a fine time. Why should we move?"

"Because I say so," Betty shot back at him. "And I happen to own that boat."

"Ah, now, lady," whined the tall fellow, in a thin nasal voice, while he shifted his position to a more comfortable one, "you wouldn't disturb two old fellers who are restin' so pretty, would you now? You look like your heart wuz as kind as your face is pretty."

At the look that followed these words Mollie stepped forward impulsively, flinging an arm about the Little Captain.

"You great big loafer!" she cried furiously, "you wouldn't dare say a thing like that if we had a man with us. He—he'd duck you in the river till you were nearly dead."

"'Twould be a nice cool death to die this kind of weather," retorted the tall rascal, with his evil grin. "Bring on your hero, lady. We'd like to meet him."

"Sure," sneered the other. "Where is the little dear?"

Mollie was about to retort when Betty laid a warning hand on her arm.

"Go over there," she directed in a whisper, indicating by the barest motion of her hand the

tree about which the rope attached to the *Gem* was wound, "and untie the knot in the rope. Don't let them see you do it. Leave the rest to me."

Mollie shot a sharp look at the Little Captain and by the light in her eyes decided that Betty had thought of a plan. She began immediately sidling over toward the tree, but seeing that the eyes of the tramps followed her, she paused and stooped over as though she were tying the lace of her boot.

At the same moment Betty's voice came to her, clear and sharp as a pistol shot. She looked up and saw that the Little Captain grasped a black, ominous looking object in her hand.

"It's a pistol!" Mollie whispered, gaspingly.

Then seeing that the attention of the tramps was diverted from herself, she slipped over to the tree and began deftly pulling out the knot which Betty had put in the thick rope.

"A pistol," she thought, her heart hammering. "How in the world did Betty get it?"

Meanwhile Betty was getting in a little fine work, the artistry of which the Outdoor Girls did not fully appreciate till afterward.

"Now I think you'll move," the Little Captain called to the startled tramps. Her voice was not like Betty's at all, so thin and metallic it was. There was resolution in that voice, and the tramps

knew she meant what she said. "I'll give you till I count up to ten," she went on. "Then if you're not both completely out of sight I'll try my aim on you. I'm very much in need of a little practice."

But she did not need count up to five. Out of that boat leaped the two men, the tall one's long legs carrying him a little in advance of his fat comrade.

Headlong they scuttled up the side of the hill, making wildly for the shelter of the trees while Betty, turning so as to keep them covered, counted calmly and not too slowly, up to ten.

As the fleeing tramps disappeared from view at the counting of the last numeral, Betty excitedly turned her weapon on the girls.

"Get in the boat—get in!" she urged, flourishing the pistol wildly. "Get in before they find out it's all a sh—sham. Don't stand gaping there. Get in, I tell you!"

The girls obeyed, more for the sake of getting out of range of that wildly moving pistol than from fear of the tramps. They were still gasping and a bit dazed from the suddenness of what had happened when the putt-putt of the *Gem's* engine fell reassuringly on their ears. At the same moment the little boat fairly leapt away from shore, Betty tensely grasping the wheel.

It was not till they were well out upon the river that Betty relaxed her position. Then, to the girls' utter surprise and horror, she began to laugh hysterically.

"Mollie! Take the wheel! Do!" she cried, as the *Gem* zigzagged crazily across the water. "I've got to have my laugh out or I'll d-die."

Obediently Mollie took the wheel and the Little Captain made room for her. Then she covered her face with her hands and rocked back and forth with merriment—or tears. The girls were not sure which.

"Betty, are you crazy?" cried Mollie. "Stop it this minute and tell us what's the matter with you."

"There's n-nothing the matter with me," gasped Betty, lifting a face that was flushed with laughter. "Only it's so—so—funny."

"Come out of it, Betty Nelson, and explain yourself," demanded Grace. "What's so funny?"

"That!" replied Betty, making a little helpless movement with her hand toward the pistol which had dropped unnoticed to the deck. "They—those men—looked so—funny——" She began to laugh again while the girls looked at one another in despair.

"Poor Betty," sighed Grace. "She was such a happy girl!"

"Never," retorted Betty, her voice still tremulous with laughter, "as happy as she is at this minute. Oh, girls, it was such a good joke and it got across so beautifully."

As she threatened to go off again into another paroxysm of mirth, Mollie leaned forward and picked up the pistol from the deck, holding it gingerly.

"If you don't explain at once, Betty Nelson," she threatened, "I'll——" then she stopped while her eyes widened in amazement and dawning comprehension. "Why, it's—it's—a fake," she stammered.

"You wretch," cried Grace, while Amy leaned over Mollie's shoulder to peer at the counterfeit weapon. "And all the time you fooled us as much as you did the tramps!"

"Well, you must admit they were some fooled," said Betty, leaning back, weak with her laughter. "To see them galloping up the hill with a perfectly harmless little toy pointed at their backbone was a sight I'll never forget. I—I wouldn't have missed it for anything."

CHAPTER X

A TOY PISTOL

THE girls were sailing out in mid-stream now with the mouth of Rainbow Lake only a short half mile before them. And they were still discussing the tramps and Betty's masterly treatment of them.

In spite of the joke that had been played with the toy pistol, there was an undercurrent of gravity in their conversation. It was impossible to help wondering what might have happened had not Betty been possessed of the toy pistol.

"How did you happen to have it?" asked Amy, curiously, referring to the weapon. "You didn't say anything to us about it."

"Didn't think of it," returned Betty. Once more she had the wheel and every once in a while she listened to the sound of the engine as though she were not yet quite satisfied with it. "Dad brought it home to me," she was still speaking of the pistol, "a few nights ago. Said it might come in handy sometime, but if he were in my

place he wouldn't shoot unless it was absolutely necessary. Of course he meant it as a joke, but he didn't know what a serious purpose it was going to serve."

"I'll say he didn't," said Mollie, thoughtfully. "I tremble to think what might have happened if you hadn't had his little present handy."

"Oh," said Betty, confidently, "we'd have gotten rid of the tramps somehow."

"I don't know," returned Mollie, soberly. "They looked like a pretty mean pair, and I don't think they had any notion of giving up the *Gem* till you flashed the pistol at them."

"Do you think," asked Amy, wide-eyed, "that they meant to steal the boat?"

"More than likely," said Grace, opening a box of fudge bought for this occasion. "They knew we couldn't do anything. What are four girls anyway against two men?"

"A great deal if they happen to be Outdoor Girls," said Betty staunchly. "We haven't lived in the open so much without developing pretty good muscles, you know."

"Just the same," Grace persisted, "I reckon we'd have had a pretty hard time making them move."

"Well, we did make 'em move, anyway, which is the main point," said the Little Captain, sen-

sibly. "And now suppose we forget about them. Look," she pointed eagerly ahead of them, "there's where Rainbow Lake begins. Not very far now, girls."

"Hip, hip, hooray!" shouted Mollie irrepressibly. "I can't wait to get a glimpse of your brother's shack, Amy."

Amy smiled dreamily.

"I tell you what," she said. "Let's make a big campfire to-night after dinner and all sit around it and tell stories. I'm just aching for a sniff of burning wood."

"We'll give you more than a sniff, honey," returned the Little Captain, merrily. "We'll build a fire that will make the birdie's eyes pop out."

"Sounds good to me," said Mollie, longingly. "I say, Betty, don't you suppose we could work a little more speed out of the *Gem?* We don't seem to be making much progress."

Betty looked worried.

"I'm doing my best," she said. "But somehow she doesn't work very well. There's still something wrong with the engine. It's kicking like a bucking broncho."

"Let's hope it holds out till we get to camp, anyway," said Grace, prayerfully. "We don't want to stop at any more islands for repairs."

"It's getting late too," said Amy anxiously. "We don't want to get there after dark."

Betty laughed.

"Why, there isn't a chance in the world of that now," she said, adding with a chuckle: "Why, we're near enough now to get out and tow the *Gem* along shore and still get there before dark. Isn't that the rock your brother spoke of, Amy?" she asked eagerly, pointing to a huge rock, whose jagged contour suggested a horse's head, looming directly ahead of them.

Unless she was mistaken it was this rock which Henry Blackford had told them to look out for, as the cabin was situated a scant mile further down the lake.

Amy followed Betty's pointing finger and cried out eagerly.

"That's it," she said. "There couldn't be two rocks like that at this end of the lake."

"Looks as if our journey were almost ended, girls," said Grace, sighing as she reluctantly placed the cover on her box of fudge. "We shall soon see the spot where we are to spend two riotous months——"

"Maybe so and maybe not," interrupted Betty in so chagrined a voice that they looked at her in surprise. And then they noticed that the rhythmic sound of the engine had ceased.

"Now what's the matter?" asked Mollie, frowning.

"Search me," returned the Little Captain, cheerfully. "I beg your indulgence, ladies, till I find what's up."

But she could not find "what was up," and neither, for that matter, could any of the other girls. The only fact that they knew positively was that for some mysterious reason and in some mysterious way the engine of the little boat had "lain down"—gone suddenly and irrevocably "dead."

"Well, I'll say this is our unlucky day," said Mollie, disgustedly, straightening up from her work on the engine to face the Little Captain. "Beginning with engine trouble, then tramps and now more engine trouble——"

"Well, there's one comfort," spoke up Amy, trying to be optimistic. "We've had about all the trouble we can have. Things can't be any worse."

"Oh, yes, they can," contradicted Grace, in a voice of patient resignation. "Has any one happened to notice that it's raining?"

"Raining!" they gasped, and with one accord, turned startled faces to the sky. What they saw there did little to cheer them up.

Mollie groaned.

"This was all we needed," said she, "to make it a perfect day."

"Oh, for goodness' sake, cheer up," commanded the Little Captain. "Anybody would think from the way you talk that you'd never been rained on before. Didn't we buy these suits especially for knockabout wear? A drop or two of rain can't hurt them."

"They may shrink," said Grace doubtfully, carefully wiping a drop of water from her "knickers" with a square of lace handkerchief.

In spite of their plight, the sight appealed to the girls' sense of humor.

They giggled, and Mollie, taking out her own rather soiled and grimy handkerchief, carefully and gravely wiped another spot from Grace's suit.

"Stop your nonsense," cried Betty, her eyes searching the gray and lowering sky. "If we don't get busy we may all be drowned. Amy," she added, in the tone of authority she always used when they faced an emergency, "get out those oars, will you? I'm going to give you some elbow work to do."

As Amy obeyed, the girls thanked their stars for Betty's thoughtfulness. They had laughed when she had first suggested the oars, asking "if she did not realize what a reflection it was on the *Gem,* but Betty had insisted, just the same, and

now it seemed as though the oars were to play a rather important part in their adventure.

The girls took turns rowing while Betty kept the wheel, steering a straight course along the shore, meanwhile edging in steadily closer to it. She was looking for the second land-mark Henry Blackford had suggested, a small inlet off the main lake, like the one near Triangle Island, in which it would be easy to run the *Gem.*

The cabin, Henry Blackford had assured them, was situated on a rise of ground directly over the inlet. Betty remembered his words perfectly.

"If you follow your nose straight up the hill," he had said, laughing, "you can't fail to find it. The house is situated in a small cleared space at the very top of the hill."

And so Betty searched with anxious eyes for the inlet, now and then allowing her gaze to travel to the gray sky.

Luckily for them the storm seemed in no great hurry to overtake them. Although the clouds gathered blacker and more threatening every moment the rain reached them only in an occasional drop and Betty began to hope that they might gain the shelter of the cabin before the downpour overwhelmed them. Luckily they had brought the tarpaulin for the *Gem* so that the little boat should not suffer.

Although the girls rowed steadily and hard they made slow progress, pulling as they were against the wind. It seemed to Betty's impatience that they fairly crawled along.

"Oh, dear, where is that old inlet, anyway?" sighed Amy, unconsciously uttering Betty's thought. "Do you suppose we could have passed it, Betty?"

"Not with my eagle eye doing duty," Betty assured her, cheerfully, but she was beginning to feel a bit anxious about it herself. Was it really possible that they had passed the spot? The foliage was very heavy all along the shore, the branches of trees, weighted with leaves, fairly dragging in the clear water. And there was another drop of rain—and another——

And then suddenly, almost in the act of passing, she saw the inlet, a narrow, beckoning little strip of water, welcoming them home.

Almost at the same moment the other girls espied it also and let out a yell of pure joy.

"Turn to the right!" shouted Mollie jubilantly. "We are making camp at last!"

CHAPTER XI

BURNED DOWN

SKILLFULLY Betty maneuvered the little boat down the narrow neck of water, carefully avoiding the overhanging branches of trees. She was looking for just the right place to land.

The next moment she found it—a spot just made for the purpose. There was a smooth stretch, entirely cleared of bushes and tree stumps with an out-jutting bank that made an ideal landing.

"Right you are!" exclaimed Mollie, as the Little Captain steered close to shore, bidding Amy "let up" on the oars. "Couldn't have been better if we'd had it made to order."

"And we beat the rain at that," observed Grace.

"Your precious suit is saved," said Mollie, sarcastically. "Of course that's what you mean."

But Grace was too glad to straighten her cramped legs and scramble on shore to take notice of the words or the tone in which they were uttered.

The other girls followed her example while Betty remained to cover the *Gem* with the tarpaulin.

"We'll find the shack first," she said as she followed the girls and paused to make sure that the boat was well fastened and could be trusted to remain where she was. "Then we'll come back for the eatables."

"Gladly," agreed Grace, for she was again beginning to feel the first pangs of hunger.

"And now," said Mollie, as arm and arm she and Betty led the way up the rather steep ascent, "here's hoping we find the shack."

"I guess there's not much doubt of that," said Betty, confidently. "All we'll have to do now will be to take possession."

And so, of course, they were bewildered when, upon reaching the cleared space at the top of the hill which Henry Blackford had described to them, they found no cabin.

They stopped and rubbed their eyes while Grace and Amy, bringing up the rear, stopped and stared also.

"Wh-where is it?" asked Grace, too astonished to know just what she was saying. "It must be here."

"I'm glad you're so sure of that," snapped

Mollie. "Now perhaps, you'll tell us where it is."

"Don't let's quarrel," cautioned the Little Captain, adding with a puzzled frown: "Perhaps we came up the wrong hill."

"No," said Amy, positively. "I'm quite sure from what Henry told me about it, that this is the place. See, there's the huge gnarled old oak up there. He thought we'd have lots of fun seeing how far we could climb up it."

"But where is the house?" cried Grace in a voice that was almost a wail. "Trees may be all very well, but I never heard of one keeping the rain off."

"Look here!" called Betty. As usual she was the first to regain her wits. Going forward and looking around, she discovered what was hidden from the other girls where they stood, and the discovery filled her with dismay.

"Ashes," she explained, as the girls hurried over to her. "I guess there's no doubt but what this is the place all right. And probably the shack stood here once."

"Burned down!" said Mollie, in a low voice. "Oh, Betty, now what are we going to do?"

And she might well ask the question. Except for the tell-tale ashes, no one would have known

that there had ever been a cabin on that spot. The blaze which had consumed it had destroyed every timber. All that remained intact—and these were blackened and tarnished by the fire—were some pieces of metal which had probably been door hinges. Even the ashes looked as if they were not too recent. They were sodden and beaten into the soft earth as though by a terrific torrent of rain. There was a desolate look about the whole place, a depressing smell of burned wood lingered in the air.

Well might Mollie ask: "What are we going to do now?"

"I don't know," admitted Betty in reply to the question. But the next moment she had rallied and spoke in her ordinary voice.

"It's hard luck, of course," she said, "but after all it's nothing to cry about. We'll have to put up a tent, that's all."

"But we haven't any," protested Amy. "You know we didn't bring any with us."

"And we can't stay in this forsaken place, without some sort of shelter," added Grace, looking up anxiously to where the sky shone grayly through the trees. "Oh, girls, I think this is awful."

"Well, what do you want to do about it?" asked the Little Captain, exasperated into losing

her patience. "Do you want to go home and confess that you were stumped by the first little obstacle you found in your way? That would be fine for the Outdoor Girls, I must say."

"No, of course we don't want to do any such thing," said Mollie, stoutly. "We'll stay and face it out some way. Although I must say," she could not help adding, "that I don't see how it's to be done."

"There's the tarpaulin," said Betty, her quick brain already working eagerly. "We've been camping enough and seen the boys erect enough tents to know how the job is done."

"Oh, we could put up a real tent all right," agreed Grace, enthusiasm for the adventure beginning to revive as she saw Betty's plan. "But I don't see how we can use a tarpaulin——"

"Neither do I," confessed the Little Captain, with a whimsical chuckle. "But before I'm many minutes older I'm going to find out. Amy dear, would you mind stealing the tarpaulin from the *Gem?* It's a mean thing to do I know, but we need it just now more than the boat does."

Amy agreed, and Betty fell to work giving orders like any general. And, like any general who is worth his salt, she herself headed the fray, working twice as hard as any of her army.

"Suppose you bring me some of those fallen

branches, Grace and Mollie," she said. "Thank goodness for the storm they must have had here that ripped off all those perfectly good props for us.

"Try to bring me only those of the same length, girls, and pass them up if they're brittle and rotten. I tell you, if we keep on like this we'll have a perfectly good shelter before we know it. Just a minute—I'll run and get my knife."

Betty ran back to the *Gem* and passed Amy carrying the tarpaulin.

"Back in a minute," gasped the Little Captain, adding to herself as she clambered aboard the boat: "It's stopped raining. That's one stroke of luck."

Then she was back again, starting to point a couple of the sticks which the girls had brought for her approval.

This done, she stacked up a small pile of shorter props, whittling these to a point as she had done the others. It was a neat job and, considering that Mollie and Amy and Grace pitched in with a will, soon completed.

Then Betty chose a spot where the trees were in pretty good position for the erecting of the tent and, squarely in the middle of this space, planted one of the long poles.

When they had fixed it securely, fastening it

down with pieces of rope to short stakes driven deep into the ground, Betty stood off to regard the work critically.

"Pretty good, so far as it goes," she said, adding whimsically: "Unless we have a strong wind during the night. I don't believe we even need the second long prop. Now let's get busy and plant the short ones."

As the girls caught the idea, their spirits began to soar and they worked feverishly. After the first shock of their discovery that the cabin which was to have served as their camp for the summer was no cabin at all but merely a heap of sodden ashes, they began rather to enjoy the new turn of affairs.

This was romance and adventure of the highest order, and with Betty's resourcefulness and wit to do away with obstacles, they certainly intended to make the most of the circumstances.

They buried the short stakes in the ground at regular intervals, fastening them the same as they had the center one, and then, when all was in readiness, Betty, with Mollie's help, stretched the tarpaulin over the supports.

By making small holes in the latter and passing pieces of stout rope through them and around the supports, the girls finally completed a job of which they were justly proud.

Ropes were also stretched from two of the smaller supports to the trunks of trees, and Betty fastened the loose end of the tarpaulin back with a safety pin, making an admirable flap.

"Pretty neat, for amateurs," chuckled the Little Captain, when everything was done that could be done to make the improvised little tent secure and water tight. "It will give us shelter for the night anyway, and to-morrow we can think of something better to do."

"Looks pretty nifty to me," said Mollie, regarding their handiwork with intense satisfaction. "I reckon the boys themselves couldn't have made a better job, considering the tools we had to work with."

"Humph," said Grace, "I bet they couldn't have done as well."

"My, we don't like ourselves or anything, do we?" laughed Betty. "Now suppose, instead of patting ourselves on the back, we get busy and make a fire. I reckon we could stand a little something to eat."

"I'll go back to the *Gem* and get some of the supplies," volunteered Amy, adding, as she started off: "Somebody'd better help me though. It'll be quite a job."

"Go with her, will you, Mollie?" directed the

Little Captain. "Grace and I will get some brush-wood together and start the fire."

"There surely is plenty of firewood lying around loose," remarked Grace, when Amy and Mollie had gone. "It wouldn't take long to gather enough to start the whole woods blazing."

"That's what puzzles me," said Betty, and Grace looked at her inquiringly.

"What do you mean?"

"Why," said the Little Captain, straightening up and regarding Grace with a puzzled look, "I can't understand how a shack the size of this one here could have burned to the ground without starting a serious fire in the woods. There must have been a terrible blaze."

"I suppose," said Grace thoughtfully, "there either was no wind at all or so very little that the flames went straight upward."

"I hope," said the Little Captain, as though speaking aloud, "that there aren't any tramps around here."

"Tramps!" Grace echoed the word, horrified. "Betty Nelson, what ever made you think of that?"

CHAPTER XII

MAKING CAMP

BETTY regretted her recklessness in speaking out her thought about tramps several times during the next two or three hours. Grace repeated what she had said to Mollie and Amy when they came back with the provisions. Mollie only laughed and said:

"That's a long shot, Gracie, and I, for one, will bet there has never been a tramp within five miles of this place."

Amy took the idea more seriously.

However, as there was plenty of work still to be done before dark they soon forgot everything but the delight of making a real, "honest-to-goodness" camp.

Betty and Amy had stacked up a huge pile of firewood while Mollie and Amy lugged up the blanket rolls and other paraphernalia from the *Gem* and Betty busied herself with making a fireplace that would have done credit to many a more experienced woodsman.

First she scooped out enough soft earth to make a fairly deep hole which was about a foot and a half wide across the top. The inside of the hole she lined with stones and small pieces of rock, building up a sort of stone "fence" around the top of it.

And then looking about her for something that might serve to put over the top of her "stove" she came across what was undoubtedly the find of that afternoon. This was a large wire grill—rusted and old, to be sure—but a gift of the gods, nevertheless.

"Look here, girls! Who says we're not lucky?" she fairly crowed, holding up the "find" before their enraptured eyes. "If we don't have a good supper to-night, then it won't be because we haven't a per-fect-ly marvelous stove."

"Hooray!" cried Mollie, waving a frying pan joyfully about her head. "Which shall it be, Little Captain? Bacon and eggs or potatoes and onions?"

Betty's eyes twinkled.

"From the way I feel," she said, "I think it had better be both."

"So be it," replied Mollie, happily, and a moment later was busy finding the potatoes and onions.

"Here," she said, shoving the latter strong-

smelling vegetable in Grace's direction. "Stop looking in your mirror, vain thing, and get busy. You peel the onions and I'll tend to the potatoes."

"Such lack of delicacy," sighed Grace, as she obediently put away her mirror and took up an onion. "Who suggested onions, anyway? They always make my eyes water."

"Notice you eat 'em just the same," returned Mollie, unfeelingly, adding, as Betty put a match to the fire which she and Grace had laid with the greatest care: "Whee, there goes Betty. That's right, old girl, let her roar!"

"Such language!" laughed Betty, as she turned her face away from the flood of smoke that threatened to suffocate her.

The blaze from the dry wood leapt up merrily and the girls gave a whoop of sheer joy.

"This is the life!" cried Mollie, putting even more than her usual "pep" into the peeling of potatoes. "Hustle up, Gracie, and we'll soon have an aroma around this little old camp that will draw the hungry coyotes for miles around."

"Goodness, I hope not," said Betty, as she put a generous supply of butter in the frying pan and Grace dumped her first consignment of onions into it where they sizzled and fried delightfully. "If we attracted too many animals I doubt if we'd

have enough onions to go around. More butter, Gracie?"

"Oh, pile it on," returned Grace, extravagantly. "You can't have too much butter when you're frying onions. Got those potatoes ready, Mollie? The onions are browning."

"Right here," replied Mollie, as she added the potatoes to the golden brown deliciousness in the frying pan. "Now what shall I do next, Betty?"

"You might get out the bacon," suggested the Little Captain. "We'll be ready for it in a few minutes. Meanwhile, I guess our fire needs more wood."

And while Mollie rummaged for the bacon and Betty put more wood on the fire Amy "set the table." There was home-made nut bread which Mrs. Billette herself had prepared for them, delicious ginger cookies, a jar of home-made preserves, and a huge coffee cake contributed by Mrs. Nelson.

"Looks as if we wouldn't starve," remarked Grace, contentedly. "Get out that pack of paper dishes and napkins, Amy, and we'll be ready to eat. The grub's ready."

"Such language!" exclaimed Amy, as she set out four paper plates, four paper cups, and two or three larger plates which she announced were

vegetable dishes. "You should say 'Dinner is served.'"

"Grub's all right," protested Grace. "When in camp speak the language of campers, you know."

"Bacon and eggs are ready," announced Mollie at this point. "Who wants some?"

"What a question!" laughed Betty. "Here, hold your plates, everybody. First come gets the biggest piece of bacon."

There was some wild old scrabbling over this, with Amy coming out winner.

"You nearly pushed me into the butter," complained Grace, when Amy returned triumphantly with her prize.

"Goodness, what a waste of good butter," Amy retorted.

Any one who has, after several hours' work in the fresh air, been treated to potatoes and onions and bacon and eggs, to say nothing of nut bread and coffee cake, can appreciate just how the Outdoor Girls enjoyed that supper.

Not until they had cooked a second panful of bacon and eggs and cleared up the last scraps of coffee cake, did the girls really feel satisfied.

Then, after lazing for a few minutes, they scouted about to find some water in which to wash their cooking utensils. They found it in

the form of a delightful little spring that fed the merriest of merry little brooks further down the ravine.

It was an enchanted spot, there beside the brook—rich, heavy moss beneath their feet, the tinkle of rushing water in their ears, the chirping of sleepy birds overhead.

They lingered there, held by the beauty of the spot until reminded by the growing dusk that they must complete preparations for the night before complete darkness fell.

So, having filled a pail with water, they returned reluctantly to their camp and placed the pail over the fire. In a few moments the water was bubbling merrily and Mollie began briskly to wash the cutlery and utensils they had used.

"All the comforts of home," she laughed. "Even hot dish water. Who could ask for more?"

"And while you girls are fixing the dishes," said the Little Captain, "I guess I'd better get busy and make up the beds for the night. It won't be so easy to do after dark."

"Beds," echoed the girls, staring up at her. It was honestly the first time they had realized the need for beds.

"That's what I said," returned Betty, whimsically. "They may only consist of a couple of

blankets apiece but we can call 'em what we like."

"What's in a name?" murmured Grace, adding wistfully: "Oh, my comfy home and my still more comfy bed."

"Stop it," commanded Mollie. "You know very well, home was never like this. What if we do have to sleep with nothing but blankets between us and the cold, cold ground for one night? It will be all the more fun."

As Betty began to spread the blankets within the shelter of the tent Amy came in to see if she could help her and Betty welcomed her gratefully.

"I can't seem to manage the old things alone," she said. "The blankets are so big and the tent is so small. Spread down that corner, will you, Amy—there's a dear. Now, I wonder," she paused to consider, "if one blanket under us and one over will be enough."

"More than enough, I should say, considering that the night is just about as hot as any we've had," said Amy. "I'd just as soon sleep without anything over me."

"Oh, you'll need a cover toward morning," said Betty, as she spread four blankets side by side in a neat row, doubling the edges under so that the

beds when finished resembled nothing so much as sleeping bags. "It gets pretty cold around dawn out here in the woods. Now," she added, regarding her finished work thoughtfully, "I guess that's about as right as I can make it."

"It's just fine," returned Amy, enthusiastically, adding as she slipped an arm fondly about the Little Captain: "You always know just what to do to make people comfortable, Betty dear. I don't know what we'd do without you."

"Oh, nonsense," retorted Betty gayly. "Probably you'd get along a good deal better. Now let's go out and see what those girls are doing."

Mollie and Grace were very busy as Amy and the Little Captain stepped from the tent. They were gathering more firewood—enough, Mollie explained, to make a "rip-roaring campfire."

Betty and Amy went to work with them and it was not long before they had a pile of wood large enough to satisfy even their longing in the matter of a fire.

Then, having piled the dried timber up neatly with a skill born of long experience, they fired it and stood about happily as the flames licked upward, crackling and hissing merrily.

As the blaze grew the heat from the fire became intense and they were forced to retreat

from it almost to the opening of their tent. Here they flung themselves to the ground, watching the flames in dreamy content.

"Well, Amy, are you satisfied?" asked Grace at last, breaking a rather long silence. "You wanted a fire, you know."

"Oh, it's gorgeous," returned Amy, happily. "Don't you think it needs a little more wood on this end, Betty?"

"Perhaps," said the Little Captain, lazily. "Can you reach the wood, Amy?"

For answer Amy threw a handful of twigs on the blaze where they twisted and sputtered, sending out that acrid smell of burning wood that is so beloved of campers.

"I wonder," said Mollie, breaking another long silence, "what happened to Henry Blackford's shack, anyway. It's sort of mysterious, burning down all by itself."

"That's probably something we'll never know," said Betty, softly.

And so they sat about their campfire, not realizing the swift passing of time till the blaze burned low and in its flickering glow Betty looked at her watch.

Then she began softly to whistle "Taps."

CHAPTER XIII

NIGHT IN THE TENT

It was decided not to let the campfire go out entirely. In the first place, they had brought no mosquito netting and a fire was necessary to keep off insects.

And then, though this they did not acknowledge even to themselves, they felt a wee bit lonesome, away out here far from everybody, and the fire would give them just the sense of security that they needed.

And so they banked it, with the agreement that whoever woke in the night was to put more wood on it and stir it up generally.

They had great sport crawling into their sleeping bags.

"Oh, dear, all the rocks in the place are under my spine!" cried Grace, as she strove in vain to shift to a comfortable position. "I'll be all holes in the morning, if I last that long, I know I shall."

"Quick! Who has Grace's hair mattress?"

cried Mollie, urgently. "Hurry up and hand it over, Betty Nelson. I know you're lying on it."

"I'd hate to tell you what I'm lying on," chuckled Betty, lifting up a corner of the blanket and uprooting a broken-off twig. "I'll exchange my place for Grace's in a moment."

"No, you don't," retorted Grace. "This place is bad but it might be worse."

A chuckle in the darkness. Then the sound of a tremendous yawn.

"Oh," said Amy, "I wish you'd stop talking and let me go to sleep. I'm nearly dead."

And then there was silence while the girls, despite their uncomfortable beds, slept heavily. Outside the tent the fire sputtered sleepily while in the distance a night owl sent its mournful cry echoing through the still woods. After a while the moon, fighting its way through the film of clouds, flung its soft radiance down through the trees, filling the woods with silvery magic. And still the girls slept on.

When they awakened moonlight had fled before the merciless onslaught of the sun. Where the fire had been the night before were a few smoldering ashes, for no one had wakened to attend to it.

Having scrambled from the discomfort of their

beds out into the brilliant sunshine, the girls regarded the spot where the fire had been with considerable amazement.

"Well, who would have thought we'd sleep like that?" said Mollie, rubbing a bruised shin which had reposed in too close proximity to a sharp stone during the night. "We might have been visited by any number of wild animals and tramps and we'd never have known it."

"What we don't know will never hurt us," said Grace sententiously. "I only hope the *Gem's* all right."

But Betty had already seen to that and, coming back at that precise minute, announced that the motor boat was "feeling fine."

"And now for breakfast," she said, briskly. "We've got a lot to do to-day and we can't afford to lose any time."

Not till later when they were hungrily devouring rolls and coffee did they stop to ask her what she meant.

"I suppose you have some plans," said Mollie. "So you might as well tell us about them."

"All right, only hand me another roll first," returned Betty. "Thanks. Well, it's like this. Of course we all know we can't go on like this forever."

"Tell us something we don't know," com-

manded Mollie, flippantly, and the Little Captain eyed her severely.

"If you're going to interrupt——" she began, whereupon Mollie became becomingly humble.

"I didn't mean to start anything, honest," she said. "Proceed, fair damsel, proceed."

"Well," Betty began again, "I thought the best thing we could do would be to get back to Deepdale——"

"Betty Nelson, you're never going to give up the trip!" cried Mollie, horrified, and Betty broke in impatiently.

"You do get the wildest ideas, Mollie," she said. "Who said anything about giving up anything, I'd like to know! I was going to remark that a couple of us might return to Deepdale where we can get a regular tent. The boys had several tents, you know——"

"And Will said the other day," Amy broke in eagerly, "that he had had a chance to lay in a lot of air mattresses cheap. He thought we might need them sometime——"

"Lovely," said Mollie, adding with a chuckle: "Now Grace can take her comfort."

"Funny Will didn't say anything to me about buying air mattresses," said Grace, resentfully. Worshiping her brother as she did, Grace had always been a little jealous of his affection for

quiet Amy. "He might have told me," she added.

"They'll be just the thing, anyway," said Betty, enthusiastically. "I've heard those air mattresses are as soft as down."

"Anything would be better than what we had last night," agreed Mollie. "But go on, Betty. You and Amy, say, go back to Deepdale for a tent; and then what do Grace and I do?"

"Nothing, I guess," dimpled Betty, "except see that the lake doesn't run away while we're gone. We may be away over night," she added, more soberly. "If we can't get in touch with the boys right away, we might be too late to make camp again before dark. You wouldn't be scared?" she asked.

"Scared!" Mollie hooted the idea scornfully. "What's there to be scared of? You go ahead, Betty. You needn't worry about us."

"Better leave us that fake gun of yours," Grace suggested as, a little while later, Betty and Amy started off toward the *Gem*. "We might need it."

Betty laughed and, taking the weapon from her pocket where it had reposed all night, flung it toward Grace.

"Here's good luck to you," she cried. "And I hope you won't need it."

"Ditto," cried Grace, as she pocketed the realistic looking toy.

"You don't really expect that thing to protect us, do you?" asked Mollie, regarding her incredulously.

"Why not?" asked Grace, unabashed. "It did good work once; why should it not again?"

"Why, indeed?" echoed Mollie, sarcastically, but she said no more about it.

Yet, strange as it may seem, the inadequate little toy gave Grace the comfortable, satisfied feeling of being well protected.

She and Mollie had been gathering up the breakfast dishes when the latter suddenly dropped a sauce pan with a clatter that made Grace jump nervously.

"For goodness' sake——" began the latter, but Mollie did not wait for her to finish.

"What geese we mortals be, Grace Ford," she said. "How does Betty expect to get back to Deepdale when the *Gem's* engine is out of fix?"

And without waiting for a reply if, in fact, she had expected any, she took to her heels in the direction where the motor boat lay, Grace following more slowly behind her.

But before they could reach the water's edge a familiar putt-putt came to them and they were

just in time to see Betty triumphantly steer the little boat away from shore.

"What on earth did you do to it?" called Mollie, and Betty made a face at her.

"Ask the *Gem*," she shouted above the noise of the motor. "I was fussing with the engine and I accidentally touched a wire. You see the result! Good-by, we'll see you again as soon as we can."

Mollie and Grace stood on the shore waving as long as the motor boat was in sight, then, feeling rather lonely and forlorn, they turned back to camp.

"How quiet everything seems without the Little Captain," sighed Grace, as they went to the familiar work of cleaning up. "I wish she was coming back to-day."

"So do I," answered Mollie, and then stopped suddenly, cocking her head to listen. "Did you hear that?" she asked. "It sounded—Oh, Grace, I'm getting as bad as Amy!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE PROWLER

So SURE had Mollie been that she had heard a sound like somebody creeping stealthily through the woods that for a long time she was uncomfortable and nervous, though she strove to hide her uneasiness from Grace.

After the first scare, they had combed the woods thoroughly in the direction of the noise that Mollie thought she had heard, but had found nothing—and no one.

"Funny how a person's ears can play strange tricks sometimes," said Mollie, as, their morning's work done, they wandered down toward the little brook. "I could have sworn I heard a heavy body crashing through the brush. And yet I couldn't have heard it at all. After this," she added with chagrin, "I'll never dare laugh at Amy again."

They reached the brook and lay down lazily on the carpet of thick moss which lined its banks while Grace invitingly opened the box of fudge.

There was about half of it still left, and so they set to work with a will, the remaining pieces disappearing like snow before the sun.

Gradually the peace of the place communicated itself to them and Mollie's scare disappeared into the background of their contentment.

"I wonder," said Grace, after a dreamy interval when she had watched the water of the brook splashing merrily over the stones in its path, "what became of that little old woman who did so much embroidery for the Woman's Exchange? I wonder if she's all alone somewhere, sick, maybe, or too old and feeble to work any more."

"I hope she's not," replied Mollie, adding with a laugh: "It would be much pleasanter to think that perhaps she has come into a fortune, or something, and so doesn't have to work for a living any more."

"Well," sighed Grace, "as long as we're not apt ever to hear of the old soul again, we might as well take the cheery view. Have some more fudge?"

"Is this all you have?" asked Mollie, looking anxiously at the fast dwindling supply. "My, I never tasted such delicious candy in my life."

"I would have bought another box if you girls hadn't been in such an awful hurry. Now you see what you get."

"Well," said Mollie, philosophically, "give me another piece, anyway. We might as well enjoy it while it lasts."

After a while they thought it might be a good idea to wander around a bit and see just what kind of country surrounded their camp.

"We need the hike, too," Mollie added. "I shouldn't wonder if we'd be sick, eating all that fudge."

"I'll be with you in a minute," said Grace, and hurried back toward the camp, leaving Mollie to stand looking after her in surprise.

"Now what's she after?" was her thought, and a moment later she found out.

Grace reappeared through the trees, stuffing something into the pocket of her coat which Mollie recognized as Betty's toy pistol.

"Oh, Gracie, 'tis to laugh!" she chuckled, as they started on their hike. "What do you expect to kill with that thing? A couple of rabbits for supper, maybe?"

"Oh, keep still," said Grace, feeling a bit sheepish. "If I like to lug the thing along what difference does it make to you? I wish," longingly, "that Betty and Amy were back."

"That's only the tenth time you've wished that same wish in the last two hours," scoffed Mollie. "And you might just as well stop wishing till this

time to-morrow morning, anyway. I don't expect them back a minute before then."

Grace was silent for some time while they both trudged through the woods, climbing bowlders that got in their way, crashing through heavy underbrush, with now and then a stop to catch their breath and enjoy the beauty of the wild woodland about them.

It was during one of these rest periods that Grace again spoke of what was in her thoughts.

"I wonder if the boys will surely come up over the week-end," she said, pulling a piece of tall grass and chewing it reflectively. "It would be just like them to have too much work to do."

"I guess they'll all be here—all but Allen, anyway," was Mollie's reassuring reply. "He may be kept on that case he's trying to straighten out."

"That one about the stubborn old boy and his will?" said Grace, wrinkling her pretty forehead in an attempt to bring back the details of the case. "I remember Allen acted pretty mysteriously about it. I only hope he won't be silly enough to let work interfere with pleasure."

"That's just what he will do, being Allen," replied Mollie, promptly. "That's one of the things that makes him most popular—he sticks close to a job till it is finished right. And I suppose he won't think he can take a vacation till he has

straightened out the case of this old man's will to his satisfaction."

The girls went on again for a short distance but then, finding themselves confronted by a veritable fence of intertwined vines and brambles, decided they had gone far enough and turned back toward camp.

After a lunch which tasted like nectar and ambrosia to them, they were at a loss what to do with themselves and finally decided to go fishing.

"Since we didn't have sense enough to bring regular fishing tackle," grumbled Mollie, as she carefully picked out two supple young branches which had fallen to the ground, "we'll have to fish the way the farmer boy does at the old swimming pool."

"We haven't even got an old swimming pool or fishing hole, or whatever it is we need," said Grace. "I imagine that's even more important than the tackle we use."

"Oh, well, we'll find one, a hole I mean," promised Mollie. "There must be a deep spot in that brook somewhere, and all we have to do is to follow it to find out."

"Sounds easy," agreed Grace, adding, as she laughingly held aloft her branch with the string attached to it: "Now that we have our bent pins firmly in position, shall we go?"

"You bet," said Mollie gayly. "Mark my words, we'll come back with enough fish to last us a week."

But alas for her high hopes. They caught not one fish, though they spent a cramped motionless afternoon on the banks of as pretty and promising a fishing pool as one would ever want to see.

"I guess," said Grace, with an attempt at persiflage as they returned wearily to camp, "Betty's fake pistol would have done as much damage as our fishing lines, Mollie."

"Couldn't have done much less," agreed Mollie, adding with a chuckle: "Lucky we didn't depend on that fish for our dinner."

"In that case, Betty and Amy would have found only our starved remains when they returned," said Grace, adding eagerly, as their improvised tent came in view: "I say, how about a can of pork and beans to-night?"

"Perfectly topping, perfectly topping, old thing," returned Mollie, in her best English manner. "An inspiration, that. No other word would fit it, truly."

And then they giggled and went merrily about the preparation of the "inspiration." Later they built another campfire and sat beside it for a long time. They did not acknowledge to each

other how reluctant they were to "turn in" that night.

For although they had carefully refrained from speaking of the scare Mollie had given them early that morning, they had not forgotten it and the night shadows made them uneasy.

However, as even a campfire can lose some of its charm if gazed upon too long, the girls finally found their eyes closing from weariness. A day like this spent entirely in the open always made them very tired, and at last the moment came when they could not put off the business of "turning in" for another second.

"The tent will seem pretty large for the two of us," said Grace as, a few moments later, they rolled themselves in their blankets.

"Shouldn't wonder if we'd rattle around some," agreed Mollie. "But it'll be nice to have plenty of room anyway."

Strange that, lying there quiet, waiting for sleep to come, the girls heard so many more noises than they had heard on the night before.

It seemed to them that the entire woodland was alive with flutterings and queer crunchings and snapping of twigs, and once Grace even raised herself on her elbow, so sure was she that something was sniffing about the door of their tent.

But there was nothing there, and at Mollie's impatient command she lay down again. Her fingers stole under the edge of the blanket where she had hidden something. It was Betty's toy pistol!

Toward the middle of the night Grace's eyes sprang wide open as though she had touched a spring. The moment before she had been heavily asleep, now she was as wide awake as though she had never slept at all.

What was it that sent terrified chills chasing up and down her spine? Was it the rhythmic patter-patter of rain on the tautly stretched tarpaulin? That would be enough to wake her surely.

But no, that was not all. She had heard a noise, a peculiar, shuffling noise that had penetrated even through her sleep, a noise like some man or animal circling the tent.

At first it seemed almost impossible for her to move. She felt as though she were in the grip of a nightmare where she had no control whatever over her muscles. She tried to call to Mollie, but her voice died in a weak little gasp in her throat.

By a great effort she finally succeeded in dragging herself to a sitting position. Then she waited, her hand at her throat, her eyes striv-

ing to pierce the gloom behind the smoldering embers of the fire.

She saw nothing, heard nothing but the rhythmic drip-drip of the rain. The night seemed suddenly and curiously still as though, like her, it were holding its breath to listen.

Then the silence was broken by Mollie's voice, soft and husky with sleep.

"What in the world——" she began, but Grace caught her arm in a tight grip.

"Listen!" she commanded.

Wondering, Mollie obeyed and then suddenly she too was sitting upright, her body rigid. For once again came that shuffling sound like a heavy body stealthily encircling the tent.

CHAPTER XV

A SHADOWY BULK

REGARDLESS of Grace's detaining hand, Mollie sprang to her feet. She crept to the flap opening, then, flinging it wide, sprang into the open. Grace, more afraid of being left alone in the tent than anything else, followed.

The night was intensely black. The rain had chased away the moon and stars and the sky was covered with lowering clouds. The chill of the descending rain made Mollie shiver convulsively.

There it came, that stealthy dragging sound. It was at the corner of the tent and Mollie crouched back against the canvas, hoping that the intruder, whatever it was, might take her for part of the shadows.

But as she stepped back a twig cracked betrayingly beneath her foot and at the corner of the tent a black shape detached itself from the blacker shadows, stood upright for a moment, staring in her direction. Mollie was quite sure her heart stood still. She gasped and felt as

though she were strangling while her eyes remained irresistibly fixed on the thing at the corner of the tent.

She heard a gasp behind her and knew that Grace also had seen.

Suddenly the shape turned and moved off into the deeper shadows of the woods. It made no pretense of hiding its movements, but crashed noisily through the underbrush.

As though rooted to the spot Mollie and Grace remained motionless until the last sound of their enemy's retreat died in the distance.

Then Mollie half stumbled, half fell into the tent, nearly upsetting Grace as she did so. Her hands were shaking and her throat felt dry.

"Where are the searchlights?" she asked in a strained husky whisper. "Do you know where Betty put them, Grace?"

"Here," answered Grace, and, after a moment of groping in the dark, a hand torch suddenly flooded the gloom with its light. In the glow the girls regarded one another fearfully, the fright they had had showing plainly on their faces.

"Let's sit down and t-talk this thing over," suggested Mollie, trying bravely to get herself in hand. "I g-guess neither of us will want to sleep for a while."

"Sleep!" exclaimed Grace, shakily. "I feel as

though I never wanted to sleep again. M-Mollie, did you see what I saw?"

"Perfectly," said Mollie. Her voice was steady once more but it might be noted that she sat with her face toward the tent flap. "Nothing's going to take me by surprise if I can help it," she had told herself defiantly.

"Then what was it?" persisted Grace. She also was watching the tent flap. "Do you think it was an an—animal?"

"Nonsense," retorted Mollie brusquely. "Didn't you see it stand upright? And what animal ever does that?"

Grace giggled hysterically.

"Well, if it's a m-man," she said, "so much the worse. What did he want, anyway, prowling around our tent in the m-middle of the night?"

"It's nearer morning," said Mollie, regarding her wrist watch and seeing that the hands pointed to four-thirty. "It's the rain makes it seem so early."

"Well, anyway, it's pitch black," returned Grace, hugging herself hard to keep from shivering. "What difference does the time make?"

"None, except that it isn't so long to wait till morning," admitted Mollie, adding briskly: "Now, we've just got to buckle on our common sense and make up our minds not to be scared."

"Tell me that at nine o'clock to-morrow morning with the sun shining," returned Grace, shivering in spite of herself. "Just now I'm scared black and blue."

"Well, if that's the way you feel——"

"It's the way you feel too," returned Grace, quickly. "You know you're just frightened to death, Mollie. Look at your teeth chattering."

Mollie promptly clamped her lips down on this circumstantial evidence and commanded her teeth to stop chattering.

"I'm cold," she defended weakly. "That rain——"

"Yes and you were foolish to go out there in it," Grace scolded. "Suppose it had been a wild animal prowling around out there, what chance would you have had against it, unarmed?"

"What chance would we have had against it in the tent?" countered Mollie.

"We couldn't have had less," came from Grace. "Then, often an animal will hesitate to go in any place it isn't familiar with. Anyway, the tent was all the protection we had."

"I suppose so," said Mollie, wearily. She was beginning to feel dreadfully drowsy again and, if it had not been for the fact that Grace had seen exactly what she had seen, she might almost have

been able to persuade herself that once more her imagination had been playing her tricks.

At the thought her eyes sprang wide open again and she stared at Grace.

"Then," she said, her voice barely above a whisper, "I bet I did hear some one moving in the woods this morning."

"I bet you did, too," said Grace, moving a little further away from the flap of the tent. "Mollie, do you suppose there are tramps around here after all?"

"Looks like it," answered Mollie, grimly, adding, with an attempt of lightness: "Just now, I wish Betty's fake pistol were a real one."

"Sh-h," warned Grace. "Somebody might be listening. I thought I heard——" She drew back the tent flap ever so cautiously, but there was nothing visible. Only the mournful drip, drip of the rain from the trees came to them.

"What do you suppose they want?" whispered Grace, drawing nearer to Mollie as though for protection. "What do they mean by hanging around?"

"Oh, how do I know any better than you do?" snapped Mollie, for her nerves were beginning to show the strain they had been under. "And I don't see why you speak in the plural, anyway. We saw only one man, didn't we?"

"Where there's one, there's probably more," remarked Grace, gloomily, at which Mollie gave a little impatient toss of her head.

"We're probably making altogether too much fuss about a little thing," she said. "If we don't happen to be alone on this end of the lake, that doesn't say that our neighbors are all villains. This—this—prowler may have come simply out of curiosity."

"Humph!" sniffed Grace. "Then why did he choose night time to satisfy his curiosity and why did he seem scared when he found we had heard him? Curiosity—huh!"

"Well, believe the worst if you want to," returned Mollie, wearily. "Goodness, but I'm getting s-sleepy——"

"See here," warned Grace, in a voice that once more startled Mollie's eyes wide open. "If you think you have a chance of going to sleep and leaving me here to keep watch alone, you were never more mistaken in your life, Mollie Billette. You'll stay awake if I have to stick pins in you."

"Oh, all right," returned Mollie, with a sigh, trying to settle herself in a more comfortable position, "if that's the way you feel about it—But listen here, Grace, if I keep awake just to

suit you, you've got to make yourself entertaining."

"Well, of all the——" Grace began, breaking off to add with real curiosity: "Do you mean to tell me that you aren't scared any longer?"

"I'm scared to death, but I'm sleepier yet," returned Mollie, stifling a tremendous yawn. "Better hurry up, Grace. If you don't start something interesting pretty quick I'm apt to drop off despite all the king's horses and all the king's men. Going—going—gone——"

"Hold on there," broke in Grace desperately. "I have an idea. Why not play checkers?"

"Why not, indeed?" returned Mollie, opening her eyes with what almost seemed interest.

And so it came to pass that two Outdoor Girls spent the short time that still remained to dawn in a very peculiar manner. Luckily the girls seldom went anywhere without carrying some games with them and this habit stood them in good stead now.

From somewhere among the jumble of things within the tent Grace produced a much battered and worn board and men and so they settled down to play until daylight should put in its friendly appearance.

And when at last the first rays of the sun

broke through the clearing sky, the two girls were so utterly exhausted from lack of sleep and the nerve strain they had been under that they simply sprawled out upon the blankets and fell into a sound slumber.

The sun had crept high in the heavens when at last they awoke, staring at one another stupidly.

"Was it a bad dream, Mollie, or did it really happen?" queried Grace, as she rubbed a hand across her forehead. "I declare I can't remember——"

"Well, I can, only too well," cut in Mollie shortly. Mollie's temper was almost always short before breakfast. "Stop staring in that befuddled fashion, Grace Ford, and help me get breakfast. I feel badly in need of sustenance."

They went about the getting of breakfast in a curiously silent manner, too busy with their thoughts to say much. And they both looked rather grave and hollow-eyed.

It was true the situation did not seem nearly so terrifying in the broad daylight, but just the same, they knew their adventure had been rather serious.

"I'm glad Betty will be back pretty soon," said Grace at last, breaking the long silence. "She always knows what to do."

"I don't know that she'll be able to do much

more about this than we have done," retorted Mollie. It is to be noted that she had not yet had her breakfast. "Anybody would think Betty had some sort of supernatural power of making things come out right."

"I don't know about the supernatural," returned Grace. "But I do know that she pretty nearly always makes things come out all right."

"Humph," snorted Mollie, and tossed her head.

Luckily the girls had thought to put some firewood within the shelter of the tent before they had turned in the night before, so that they had enough dry wood to make a good fire. If they had been forced to try burning wet wood nobody knows what might have happened to Mollie's temper!

And when, just before noon, they heard the familiar putt-putting of the *Gem* out on the lake, Mollie, as well as Grace, felt a great relief as though a heavy burden had suddenly slipped from her shoulders.

For the Little Captain had come back!

CHAPTER XVI

AIR MATTRESSES

When Mollie and Grace saw that not only Amy and the Little Captain, but Will Ford and Frank Haley also, were in the little boat, the relief and joy of the girls reached a climax.

"Well, this is something like!" cried Mollie, putting an arm about Grace and squeezing her ecstatically. "Nothing like having the boys around once in a while, eh, Gracie?"

"I'll say!" returned Grace, as she waved to the quartette in the boat. They were still too far away and there were too many trees in their path for the *Gem's* occupants to see the wave, but that made no difference to Grace.

However, it took only a few minutes for the little motor boat to nose its way up the narrow inlet to the improvised landing above which Mollie and Grace were so eagerly waiting.

Although Betty and Amy and the boys as well had expected a rather warm greeting, they were entirely unprepared for the kind they really got.

They were hugged and kissed—boys as well as girls, much to the glee of the former—till the Little Captain called out laughingly to "Stop it!"

"What's the matter with you?" she asked. "Are you going stark, raving crazy?"

"If they are, don't attempt to stop them, Betty," laughed Frank Haley, and Will added, happily:

"Home was never like this."

However, in due time the girls calmed down to a more normal key and the whole party started toward the camp.

"Hear you had pretty tough luck—shack burned down and no tent," said Will. "It surely must have been a facer for you. Wonder you didn't come back to Deepdale, full speed."

"Will Ford, is that what you think of us?" asked gentle Amy indignantly, and Will countered lightly with:

"You ought to know better than to ask me what I think of you, Amy—especially when there's a crowd around."

The girls giggled and Amy flushed and everybody was happy!

It was not till after Mollie and Betty had prepared something for the famished boys to eat—and they had eaten it—that they settled down to a serious discussion of plans for the future.

"We've brought back a regular, waterproof tent

with us," explained the Little Captain. "Also four perfectly delightful air mattresses. But the boys think we oughtn't to stay."

"Humph," said Mollie, valiantly, "I'd like to see 'em get us away."

Strange that with the coming of the boys and Betty and Amy, the adventure of the night before had lost most of its terrifying aspect. It seemed almost something to laugh at.

However, when some time later Grace mentioned the affair to the boys, they did not seem inclined to laugh at it—not one bit.

"It's a pretty serious thing, I think," said Frank Haley. "I have a strange prejudice against anything that prowls at night."

"Same here," said Will, looking worried. "Of course, if you girls are sure you saw some one——"

"Oh, there's no doubt about that," said Mollie, positively. "We both saw it—or him—it was hard to tell whether it was really a man or not in the dark. But anyway," she added, trying to make light of it, "I don't think there's anything to be excited about. Somebody was probably just—curious."

But they hooted this idea as Grace had done some hours earlier. People did not go prowling

about a camp in the middle of the night just out of harmless curiosity.

"However, we're going to spend to-night here, anyway," said Will, rising and looking about him. "And to-morrow will be time enough to decide whether you want to stay here or not."

"There's no deciding to be done about that—it's settled," returned Betty, adding, gayly: "How do you like our tent, Will? Isn't it a masterpiece?"

"Masterpiece is right," Will returned, admiringly. "It's about as thorough a piece of work as I've seen. How about it, Frank?"

"Fine," returned Frank, as he walked about the makeshift tent, examining it. "All to the good, girls. Did you say it was rain-tight, too?" he asked of Mollie, who laughed grimly.

"I guess we ought to know," she said. "We sat for hours playing checkers with the rain pattering on top of it."

"Raining, raining everywhere, and not a drop on us," said Grace, adding, as they laughed: "Mighty lucky for us, too, that we didn't get wet. All we needed was a soaking to make our contentment complete."

"You poor children," said Betty, commiseratingly. "You must have had one awful time."

"So much so that we'd rather think of something else," said Grace, adding, as she turned to her brother: "How about the tent you brought, Will? Aren't you going to put it up for us?"

"It's for that express purpose that we came," Will returned as he led the way back to the *Gem*. "Might as well get the business part of our mission over with first and then we can enjoy ourselves."

So they went to work, and it was not long before they had the new tent up, as snug and pretty a tent as any one would wish to see. It even had a window in one side of it, a window whose canvas flap could be pulled up or let down from the inside by means of a convenient cord.

The boys would not let the girls take down the makeshift tent of tarpaulin, saying that it would serve as an excellent shelter for them, the boys, for this one night in camp. And since they had brought along another piece of tarpaulin to cover the *Gem* in case of bad weather, there was no reason why they should not leave the original tent standing.

When the boys were unloading the paraphernalia from the *Gem* Mollie noticed with surprise that they had brought along their bicycles.

"What are they for?" she asked, and the boys eyed her pityingly.

"How did you suppose we were going to get back to Deepdale?" Frank asked. "We can't take the *Gem,* and it's a little too far to walk—when you're in a hurry anyway."

"Well," was Mollie's biting comment, "the only wonder is you didn't bring along automobiles. They'd have been much quicker."

"We thought of that," agreed Will, solemnly, "But unfortunately the *Gem* protested."

But it was when Will produced his air mattresses that the girls were most deeply interested. When he first unrolled them they looked like nothing so much as dejected strips of canvas, about six feet long by two and a half feet wide.

But when he began to blow one of them up—oh, what a change there was! Before their enchanted eyes the dejected strip of canvas grew and assumed shape, blooming out majestically into a bed that, for comfort, would have delighted a king.

Betty, lolling luxuriously upon it, declared she felt as though she were floating on clouds.

"Get up and give me a feel," commanded Mollie, and the Little Captain reluctantly obeyed.

"But what's this funny thing lacing down the front?" asked Amy, pointing to a loose fold of the canvas. "Are you supposed to get inside that?"

"Certainly," answered Will, with all the pride of possession. "That's where the beauty of these things comes in. It makes all the difference in the world between comfort and discomfort."

"But how does it work?" asked Mollie, impatiently.

"Just a moment, fair maid. I'm coming to that," protested Will. "You see, it's this way. You roll all your bedclothes inside this flap, whatever you think you may need. Then you crawl in——"

"Allee same Indian pappoose, eh," murmured Betty, irrepressibly.

"About the same idea," agreed Will. "Only a little more so. After you've tucked your covers in comfortably about you, you lace this outside flap up to your chin and, presto, you've got the most complete sleeping bag in captivity."

"Seems almost too good to be true," drawled Grace. "Won't this sleeping bag be a little too warm for comfort?"

"Depends on how many covers you use," returned Will.

"I suppose," said the Little Captain, "it's also pretty good for keeping the bugs off."

"Precisely," returned Will, enthusiastically. "Completely puzzles the little dears, and by the time they've figured out how to get at you——"

"They have tired of the hunt and gone to find easier game," finished Frank.

When, some time later, four tired Outdoor Girls tested the wondrous new mattresses, they did not wonder at Will's enthusiasm. It was, as the Little Captain had said, like floating on clouds.

Betty was the last to go to sleep. She lay for what seemed a long time, luxuriating in the air mattress and the thought that Frank and Will were in the makeshift tent so near them.

"If only——" she murmured drowsily, "if only Allen were with them."

CHAPTER XVII

THE OLD MAID OF THE MOUNTAINS

RATHER early the next morning, although the girls did their best to dissuade them, Frank and Will declared that they must be getting back to Deepdale.

"If we expect to come up for the week-end," said Will, "we'll have to work hard for the next two or three days."

So the girls were forced to let them go, accompanying them quite a little distance along the rough woods road that led to the main highway a mile or two further on.

"If you girls need provisions or anything," Frank told them just before they said good-by, "there are several prosperous farms a little further on that could supply you with fresh milk and eggs and butter."

"See you later," added Will, swinging his bicycle into position, adding, for Betty's special benefit: "And next time we come we'll bring Allen along."

"Be sure you do," said Mollie, wickedly. "Betty is simply pining away."

Then the girls turned back to camp once more, feeling rather lonesome. They did wish the boys could have stayed.

"I guess we might as well pull down this thing," said Betty, eyeing the tent which they had erected on the first night of their stay in the woods. "We have a real tent now and when the boys come up for the week-end, they'll have that big one of Roy's with them."

So down came the tarpaulin, although the girls had almost as much difficulty in the dismantling of the improvised tent as they had had in the erecting of it.

At last it was down, however, and they set about making the camp as neat as possible. This done, they wandered through the woods, trying to find if there were any camp in the neighborhood which might harbor tramps.

They found none, and they finally returned to camp more mystified than before.

That night around the campfire—the prettiest one they had yet made—Betty cautioned them that the best thing they could do would be to put "this scare about tramps" out of their minds.

"There's no use ruining our whole summer," she said. "The chances are, even if there are

tramps about, they don't mean to annoy us. We haven't any jewelry or valuables that they might hope to steal, and they will probably be only too glad to give us a wide berth."

"That's what I say," agreed Mollie, heartily. "It's up to us to say whether we're going to let such a foolish thing ruin our fun. I, for one, don't intend to."

"Nor I," said Amy, stoutly. "Now that I'm here I'm going to have the time of my life."

"Good," said Betty, patting Amy's hand encouragingly. "That's the way to talk. And now will you put some more wood on the fire, Gracie? I feel like telling some stories."

"All right," agreed Grace, with a glance into the black shadows of the woodland beyond the dancing light of the fire. "Tell as many as you like, as long as they're not ghost stories."

And so, after this, the Outdoor Girls did really make a determined effort to forget all about the possibility of tramps lurking in the neighborhood and set about, as only they knew how, to crowd each day to the brim with fun.

They made several trips through the woods to a near-by farmhouse for supplies, and on one of these trips they decided not to stop at the farmhouse but to hike a little further on, up into the hills.

They had never been so far away from camp before, and it was with a feeling of adventure that they started to climb a miniature mountain into the denser woodland beyond.

"Oh, it's lovely up here," said the Little Captain. "The higher up you get the better the air becomes."

"Fine," agreed Grace, adding as she came abreast of Betty: "What's that over there, Little Captain? Doesn't it look like smoke?"

The girls gazed in the direction of her pointing finger and saw that, sure enough, right above the rise of the hill, a thin line of smoke was curling.

"Somebody's camp, maybe," said Mollie, instinctively lowering her voice. "Funny thing, away out here in the wilds."

"About the only place you'd expect to find a camp, I suppose," drawled Grace, but Betty interrupted, cautiously pushing them a little further back down the hill.

"Listen," she said, in a whisper, her eyes bright with eagerness. "Maybe that's the camp of the tramps that we've been looking for. And if it is we'll have to be careful not to let them know we're around."

"You said something, Betty Nelson," agreed Grace, beginning to back still further down

the hill. "I vote we get away from here."

"Nonsense," said Betty, sharply, but still in a whisper. "You can run away, if you want to, but I'm going to see what that smoke means."

"Right you are," agreed Mollie, and together they began cautiously to ascend the hill, Amy and Grace bringing up the rear.

They had almost reached the top of the hill when some one came suddenly toward them through the trees, bringing them to a short stop.

And what they saw made them rub their eyes hard to make sure they were not dreaming.

A little old lady she was, with a figure so slight and thin it looked as if a breath of wind might blow it away and a face that was sweet in spite of the wrinkles of age. Her head was uncovered and her hair, curly and snow-white, framed her face softly and pleasantly. Altogether she was a little old lady who looked as though she might have stepped straight out of a story book.

She did not seem to see the astonished girls at first but came straight on, head bent and old feet faltering uncertainly on the rocky path. Then suddenly she looked up and saw them.

A thin, blue-veined hand flew to her throat in swift alarm and she stared at them silently.

Betty, recovering from her surprise, flew to

"OH, I'M SO SORRY IF WE STARTLED YOU," SAID BETTY.

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the old lady's side, taking a wrinkled old hand in her firm young one.

"Oh, I'm so sorry if we startled you," said the Little Captain, penitently. "You see we saw the smoke from your fire and we thought——"

"Oh, were you coming to see me?" asked the little old lady, a light springing to her eyes. "I'm glad. I've been very lonesome, lately. Do come up, dears, and rest yourselves. You look very worn."

And so she turned, retracing her steps and evidently taking it as a matter of course that the girls would follow her. Betty ran forward, catching the old lady's arm and helping her over the rough places, meanwhile sending an urgent look of command over her shoulder to the still amazed girls. The look said more plainly than words:

"If you dare tell this old soul we didn't come on purpose to see her, I'll murder you all."

"We'll play the game," Mollie called, as though in response to spoken words, and Betty nodded contentedly.

Their queer little hostess caught nothing of this byplay, she was seemingly too intent upon not stumbling over the stones and tree stumps that dotted her front yard.

"Some day," she said, in quaint apology, "I am

going to have all these rocks and logs removed. But, you see, I'm not strong enough to do it myself." At this pathetic admission Betty felt a strong desire to take the frail little person in her arms and tell her it was all right. Who minded a few sticks and stones, anyway?

Midway of the clearing there stood a little cabin, badly in need of paint and repairs, and it was from the chimney of this small abode that the smoke was pouring in a thin spiral—the smoke which had first warned the girls of human presence.

The little old lady swung wide her door with a gesture as grand as though she were welcoming her guests to a palace.

"Come in," she said, adding with a sigh as they obeyed: "I wish I had some refreshments to offer you young ladies, but the fact is, I—have—nothing left in the house. I was on my way," she added hastily, as though the girls might misconstrue her confession, "to lay in some more supplies when I met you."

They stayed with their queer little hostess for the better part of an hour and before the time had passed, they had fallen hopelessly in love with her.

She was sweet and quaint and pathetically eager that they should enjoy themselves. The girls,

growing more and more interested as they came to know her better, skillfully drew her out, leading her to talk about herself.

This she did with a frankness that was disarming.

"They call me the Old Maid of the Mountains —the good people around here," she confessed, as though she took real pride in the title. "Sometimes they come to see me, although often they are too busy with their own affairs to bother about a little old woman. Although," she added bravely, as though once more afraid that the girls might be led to pity her, "I am not often lonesome. I have my work, you see."

"Work?" repeated Betty vaguely. Somehow it seemed impossible that this frail little creature was able to work.

"Yes," returned the little old lady, interpreting her puzzled look, "I do needlework—a great deal of it. Though," she added, with a sigh, "it is hard for me to do it lately. My eyes are not as good as they were. Take care of your eyes in your youth, my dears," she finished, looking around at them earnestly. "And never, whatever you do, cry!"

The girls, rather amazed at this command, could find nothing to say. However, this made little difference, as the old lady, once started,

seemed glad enough to have somebody to talk to.

She rambled on and on, while the girls listened eagerly. Suddenly, with a quick look at the clock, she started to her feet.

"Mercy me!" she exclaimed, in dismay. "It is getting late, my dears, and I must get to the farm and back before nightfall. I hope you'll pardon me, but it takes me such a long, long time." She sighed again and patiently reached for her shawl. When she tottered and grasped the edge of a table for support, the girls realized how really weak and feeble she was.

"I do believe," was Betty's shocked thought, "that she's actually hungry."

Aloud she said, with the special, irresistible manner that she reserved for very old people.

"You're going to stay just where you are! I'll run and get what you need."

CHAPTER XVIII

A FEAST FOR A KING

BEFORE the little old lady found breath for reply Betty had darted from the room. After a surprised moment, Amy followed her.

Grace and Mollie, following Betty's unexpressed wish, stayed with the old lady.

Half way down the hill Amy caught up to Betty.

"Where to?" she asked, panting. "And why the dreadful hurry?"

"Oh, Amy!" exclaimed the Little Captain, slowing her pace, "did you ever see anything so pitiful and so dear as that little old thing—did you?"

"She's a darling," agreed Amy, warmly. "Imagine her really enjoying being called the Old Maid of the Mountains!"

"She's quaint and, in some ways, rather queer," admitted Betty, as they reached the main road and swung along toward the nearest farmhouse. "But I reckon she gets that way from living so much alone. Poor little soul, she's altogether too

feeble to live alone. Amy," changing the subject abruptly, "how much cash do you happen to have on hand?"

"Two dollars and three cents," returned Amy, promptly. "I didn't bring much along because I thought we wouldn't need a great deal in the way of provisions."

"It'll do," said Betty, adding musingly: "I have a dollar, and with that we ought to get the farmer's wife to give us a pretty good dinner."

"What are you going to get?" asked Amy, as they turned into the broad drive that led up to the rambling porch of the old farmhouse.

"A chicken, if I can," said Betty. "We can cook it in the old lady's oven. I noticed she had a pretty hot fire in the stove in spite of the hot weather. And apple sauce if I can. And fresh butter and maybe a home-made pie——"

"Good gracious!" cried Amy. "What do you think this is, Thanksgiving?"

"It's going to be a mighty fine party if I have anything to say about it," returned Betty, as the farmer's wife appeared on the threshold—a gigantic figure of a woman but with a rosy, kindly face that attested to her good-nature.

As the girls had been there several times before, she recognized them instantly and greeted them with a broad smile.

"Come right into the kitchen," she said, waving a hand toward the interior of the house from which floated an appetizing aroma. "I've a pie in the oven and I'm afraid it will burn."

With these words she vanished, leaving the girls to follow. This they did eagerly, for the smell of baking things drew them irresistibly.

"And now what'll you have?" asked the good-natured giantess, whose name was Mrs. Joyce. "I've got plenty of fresh eggs to-day—the hens have been workin' overtime—and more milk than I know what to do with. It'll be a mercy if you'll take it off my hands."

Betty laughed.

"It's very kind of you," she said. "But it isn't milk and eggs that we're really after to-day. You see, we want the makings for a real feast."

Then she explained while the kindly woman listened with interest and sympathy.

"And so you've met the Old Maid of the Mountains," she said, an indulgent smile on her wide mouth. "A queer little soul, but a good woman for all that. We folk around here try our best to befriend her, but she's too proud to take much from us. Sure, if it's a spread you want, you shall have it."

Mrs. Joyce sent Henry, the hired man, out

to kill a chicken, "the likeliest bird in the lot," and the girls waited while the slain fowl was duly plucked and cleaned.

Afterward the farmer's wife filled a huge hamper for them, putting in, in spite of their protests, a generous supply of home-made biscuits and doughnuts, adding as a final glorious gift a huge apple pie which she had taken from the oven, crisp and flaky of crust, but a moment before.

"Oh, you're too good to us, Mrs. Joyce," murmured Amy, longing eyes on the tempting pastry. "We don't deserve it."

"Anybody who tries to do good in this world deserves every nice thing that comes to 'em," said the good woman stoutly, as she securely fastened the top of the hamper. "Now, be gone with you, while I tend to the rest of my baking."

"But, Mrs. Joyce, we haven't paid you yet," protested Betty. "How much——"

"Run along with you," repeated the big woman, already busy with her oven. "You don't owe me a cent."

However, Betty, with Amy's help did finally get her to consent to take some money for the feast—although it was only a tenth of what it was really worth—and when the girls turned once more toward the cabin of the Old Maid of the

Mountains it was with a warm feeling about their hearts.

"There are so many lovely people in the world," said Amy, contentedly as, with the basket between them, they toiled up the steep ascent.

"I only hope," said Betty in a low tone, as they stopped before the door of the little cabin, "that our little old lady won't object to our contributing our feast."

"I don't think she will," returned Amy, "as long as we're going to eat it too."

But when the Old Maid of the Mountains saw what that basket contained she was too amazed and bewildered at first to make any protest, if, indeed, she had wanted to. She just sat and stared from one to the other of the girls as though she were trying to figure things out.

"But what are you going to do, my dears?" she asked in a plaintive, uncertain little voice that went to Betty's heart. "I don't understand."

"Why," explained Betty, gayly, "if you don't mind, we've invited ourselves to dinner with you. That is," she paused and added with that pretty deference she always paid to the old, "if you are quite sure you don't mind?"

She was startled then, and disturbed to see that the old lady's eyes had suddenly filled with tears. But all the quaint little person said was:

"I do not mind!"

And indeed, as the preparations for the feast gayly proceeded, it almost seemed as though the little old lady grew younger. Her eyes became bright and a color warmed her sweet old face, making her look more than ever like a picture out of a story book.

"It is so lovely to have young ladies about," she sighed, as Betty gayly tested the chicken with a fork and proclaimed that it was done. "Youth is a wonderful thing."

"You," said Betty, turning to her impulsively, "will never be old."

The old lady shook her head, although the compliment evidently pleased her.

"My soul will remain young perhaps, my dear," she said, gently. "But it is my body that must feel the weight of years."

"After all," returned the Little Captain, "it's the soul that really counts. That's what mother says."

"You are a dear child," returned the little old lady, reaching up to pat the hand that Betty had laid on her shoulder. "And you must have a very sweet mother. I envy her. I have always longed to have a daughter of my own." At the words such a look of sadness spread over the wrinkled old face that Betty knew she had chanced upon a

secret wound in the old lady's heart. She had a quick moment of wondering what had been the early life of the Old Maid of the Mountains.

However, as Mollie announced that dinner was ready to serve, they were soon merry again, crowding eagerly about the table.

Their hostess occupied the seat of honor at the head of the table while Betty took the foot, proudly presiding over the carving of the chicken.

"I don't know anything about this business," she admitted, as she severed a brownly roasted leg from the bird with the aid of a carving knife of finest steel.

This was one thing Betty, and the other girls, too, had noticed about the contents of the little cabin. Although the furnishings were scant, they were all of good material.

The crockery—what there was of it—was of the finest china, and the cutlery—what there was of that—was tempered steel and real silver. Like the thoroughbred old lady, they were genuine, seeming strangely incongruous and out of place in the tumbled-down little cabin.

"She's a mystery," thought Betty, as she struggled nobly with the chicken. "I'd give a good deal to know something about her past. I reckon she's had an interesting one."

Take it all in all, it was one of the most de-

licious dinners that the Outdoor Girls had ever sat down to, and, as Mollie afterward observed: "That was saying something."

As for their quaint little hostess, it is safe to say she had not been given such a treat in a long while.

She ate as though she were famished, and Betty realized with a new rush of pity that what she had at first suspected was true, the old lady had been really hungry—half fed.

Yielding to the girl's eager entreaties she even took a second piece of Mrs. Joyce's wondrous pie, and when she had finished she sat back with a sigh, looking at the girls plaintively.

"I know I shall be sick," she said. "I have not eaten so much in——" she caught herself up suddenly as though sorry for the admission and went on talking hurriedly, trying to cover it up with a flow of words.

After dinner the girls carefully cleaned up, anxious that the little old lady's party should not be spoiled by any hard work on her part. And then, as the twilight shadows were beginning to fall, they knew it would be necessary to hurry if they were to reach camp before dark.

"And we're none too sure of the way, either," Mollie said to the Little Captain in an undertone. "There's no time to waste."

But when they explained this to the old lady, she seemed so disappointed and frail and little that they had hard work to get away at all.

"We'll come back to-morrow or next day," Betty promised, as they stepped out into the open, the old lady following them hospitably to the door. "We've just had a lovely time."

At the edge of the woods they turned and looked back.

The Old Maid of the Mountains was waving her hand.

CHAPTER XIX

THE STORM

So INTERESTED were the girls in the little old lady and so fond had they grown of her that they found it hard to keep away from the little cabin where she lived.

They kept her supplied with canned goods of all sorts, to say nothing of milk and fresh eggs, until the old lady lost her frail and wasted look and even seemed less feeble.

She insisted on paying for what they gave her, and the girls humored her to the extent of letting her pay a mere fraction of what the supplies were actually worth. With this she was well content, for it gave her the feeling of independence that it was necessary for her to have.

Then one day, coming up the hill to the little cabin, the girls found the Old Maid of the Mountains sitting in front of her door, bending closely over some needlework she held in her hand.

She looked up as the girls accosted her and then passed her hand wonderingly before her

eyes. There was a puzzled expression on her face.

"I—I can't see," she said plaintively. "The sun must be too strong."

"You have strained your eyes, sewing," scolded Betty, as she took the work from the old lady's unresisting hands. "Feeling better now?" she asked anxiously.

The old lady nodded.

"There were black dots dancing before my eyes," she explained. "But now they are gone. I feel better." She reached up a hand for the embroidery on which she had been working but Betty never even noticed the gesture. She was gazing at the piece of work, wide-eyed.

"Girls!" she cried. "Look at this! Isn't it——" her voice was agitated as she held out the embroidered centerpiece to Grace. "Isn't it the companion piece to the one you bought for your mother, Grace?"

Grace nodded dumbly, while in Mollie's black eyes began to smolder a great excitement. And the next moment Amy, too, had grasped the significance of Betty's question.

The little old lady sat staring from one to the other of them in puzzled bewilderment.

"You do not like my work?" she asked, gently.

"Like it," repeated Betty vaguely, and then

turned excitedly to the little woman. "Tell me," she demanded. "Did you ever sell embroidery at the Woman's Exchange in Kayford?"

The old lady seemed still more puzzled.

"Yes," she answered. "I used to do a great deal of work for the Exchange before—before—my eyes became so bad. It is taxing, you know," she finished, gently and uncomplainingly. "That sort of work."

The girls exchanged wondering glances and then Betty explained to the little old lady how they had come to hear of her that day at the Woman's Exchange.

"We've been wondering about you a great deal," put in Amy, gently. "I'm very glad we have found you."

"That is good of you, my dear," said the old lady, with her grave smile. "You have been very, very good to an old woman."

On the way back to camp that night the girls discussed their discovery excitedly.

"Who would ever have expected to find our poor old lady in the Old Maid of the Mountains?" marveled Amy. "It's just like a story."

"It's a pretty sad story, just the same," said Betty, gravely. "Think of that poor lonesome little soul deprived of her one small means of support because her eyes have failed! Oh, girls, I

wish we could find a million dollars for her somewhere!"

But, however fascinating the subject might be, the girls had something to think of besides their Old Maid of the Mountains. For this was Friday and the boys were expected the following afternoon!

"It seems an age since we've seen them," said Amy, plaintively. "I hope they'll come early."

It was not until they were building a campfire later on that the girls noticed any decided change in the weather. And even when they did, they at first attached no special importance to it.

But when the wind, which had begun as a soft sighing in the trees, waxed so vicious that the flames from the fire began to reach out hungrily for the surrounding trees, the girls began seriously to worry.

"Looks like a big gale," said the Little Captain, soberly. "Better check the flames, girls. Don't want to start a forest fire."

And so, for the first night since they had made their camp, they were forced to go without their campfire. They stood somberly watching the last stubborn flames flicker, licking up in sudden yellow darts, then dying down morosely.

"It's a shame," said Grace. "Talk about Ham-

let with Hamlet left out. That's what a camp is without a campfire."

"Humph," said Mollie, putting back a strand of hair that the wind had whipped about her face, "shouldn't wonder if we'd be lucky to have even our tent left to us by morning. Just listen to that wind!"

"If it only doesn't rain, too," said Amy, sharing the general disquiet.

"Wouldn't mind the rain half as much as the wind," remarked the Little Captain, as she started on an inspection of the tent to make sure it was as securely fastened as it was possible for it to be.

At last, satisfied that it was as strong as human hands could make it, she returned to the girls who were still watching the dying flames of their campfire.

The wind was rising higher and higher every moment while the branches of the trees swayed and moaned beneath its fury. Leaves and small twigs fell upon the girls where they stood, mute evidence of the wrath of the elements.

"Th-there comes the rain!" said Amy suddenly. "Listen!"

They listened, and, far out on the lake, they could hear a tearing, rending sound and a muffled

splashing that they knew was rain beating on the water.

"A cloudburst!" muttered Mollie, adding, suddenly: "Did you cover the *Gem,* Betty?"

The Little Captain nodded and made a swift movement toward the tent.

"Get inside, everybody," she commanded. "This is going to be a beautiful storm once it reaches us. Might as well stay dry as long as we can."

They had barely crowded into the tent when the rain overtook them, tearing down in a solid, sheeting torrent. Betty pulled the flap taut, fastening it securely.

At the same moment Mollie rushed over to the window in the back of the tent, pulling down its covering of canvas.

"All secure so far," she said, trying to make her voice sound cheerful. "Now let's hope the tent will hold up."

"Let's light the torches, somebody," cried Betty. "And when we've found the matches we can light some candles, too. In about two minutes we'll be as cozy as bugs in a rug."

It was impossible to withstand Betty's optimism, and in a short time, with the aid of plentiful candle light, they were not only feeling more

resigned about the storm but were even beginning to enjoy the novelty of it.

"Rain cease, tent be water-tight," chanted Grace, raising her eyes aloft. "Be water-tight, tent——"

"You needn't be so prayerful about it," chuckled Betty. "Do you suppose the boys would have lent it to us, if it hadn't been water-tight?"

"I'm just putting in my plea for good measure," explained Grace. "Whew, I never did hear such a storm."

"It's awful," agreed Mollie, rising restlessly and walking over to the flap of the tent. She stood there a moment, then, shaking her head as though satisfied, returned to her seat.

A few minutes later, however, she repeated the action, standing so long by the tent flap this time that Betty was moved to comment.

"What's the matter, honey?" she asked, adding flippantly: "If you're waiting for the boys you're wasting your time. They're not due till to-morrow, you know."

Instead of answering, Mollie made an imperative little gesture with her hand. Startled, Betty joined her silently and was still further alarmed to find that Mollie was trembling.

"There's somebody out there, Betty," she said,

in a stage whisper. "Are you game to—lift—the flap——"

For answer Betty stooped and began untying the cord that held the flap while Grace and Amy came over to see what was wrong. Before they could speak, Mollie motioned them to silence and they stood, frozen into immobility, fearing they knew not what.

Swift as thought, Betty flung back the flap of the tent, shading her eyes to see out into the dark. A wild gust of wind rushed viciously into the tent.

At the same moment out in the night two black figures flung into the woodland, crouched almost double, running. Over Betty's shoulder Mollie had seen also, and now she clasped the Little Captain's arm convulsively.

"Come inside, Betty, come inside!" she cried wildly, and dazedly Betty obeyed, letting fall the flap of the tent. It flung crazily back and forth, whipped by the savage wind, but the Little Captain never noticed. She was regarding the girls with dilated eyes.

"That time," she whispered, "I saw for myself!"

CHAPTER XX

THE HOLD-UP

To say that the Outdoor Girls were thoroughly shaken by this experience would be to treat the matter lightly. They were filled with consternation.

It was certain now that there were tramps in the neighborhood, tramps who chose stormy dark nights to prowl and spy upon them.

"What can they want?" Amy demanded, half tearfully. "We haven't a thing with us that would be worth their while to steal——"

"They don't know that, I suppose," broke in the Little Captain.

"But if their purpose is to steal," argued Mollie, "why in the world do they always run away when they find they are discovered?"

"Maybe they think we're armed," suggested Grace, and in spite of her alarm, Betty's eyes twinkled.

"We are," she said, patting the pocket where the toy pistol reposed.

"Maybe," said Amy, thoughtfully, "these tramps belong to the same gang as those we had the row with on Triangle Island."

"Perhaps," Mollie took her up eagerly, "they're the *very* same ones. We're not so very far from Triangle Island, you know."

"If that is true," said the Little Captain whimsically, "maybe the toy pistol is serving as our protection after all. If they think we're armed, they'll be mighty careful how they get too close to us."

"I only hope," said Grace, and again her tone was prayerful, "that they don't think to call our bluff."

There followed a long silence during which the girls tried to take up their reading again and did not make much of a success of it.

Outside the storm raged with undiminished fury, the wind threatening any moment to tear the tent from over their heads. The rain continued to fall in torrents.

"I wish that rain would stop," sighed Grace, uneasily. "The sound of it in the woods outside makes me think I hear footsteps all the time."

"I don't believe we'll be bothered any more to-night," said the Little Captain.

"And to-morrow," added Amy thankfully, "the boys will be here."

After a while, since the storm seemed destined to continue through the night and since they could not very well sit up till morning, the Outdoor Girls finally turned out their lights and went to bed.

They passed an uneasy, comfortless night with one or the other of them forever getting up to steal over to the tent flap and peer fearfully into the darkness beyond. It is safe to say that not one of them slept two solid hours of the time.

And when morning came, revealing a dreary dark day, they felt, as they looked, hollow-eyed and spiritless.

"The weather looks just the way I feel," remarked Grace, as she went mechanically about the preparing of breakfast. "I'm so sleepy I can hardly keep my eyes open."

However, later in the morning, it seemed as though nature relented of her harsh treatment and decided to give the girls a bit of sunshine. And it is remarkable what a difference a little sun will make.

The girls perked up miraculously and began clearing up the camp in anticipation of the boys' arrival.

"I wonder when they'll be here," mused Mollie, as she gathered all paper and bits of refuse

from in front of the tent and made them into a neat pile ready to be burned.

"About noon, I suppose," said the Little Captain. All morning she had been wondering if Allen would be with the boys, and now as the time drew near for their arrival she was nervous and jumpy, not at all like her usual calm young self.

The girls noticed the change, and once Mollie said, teasingly:

"Cheer up, honey. You know Will promised to bring Allen along, if he had to do it at the end of a rope. And you know, too, that Will is a man of his word!"

"I wonder," Amy had added, casually, "if Allen has fixed up the matter of that old man's will yet. He has been so very mysterious about it——"

"That he's made us all curious," finished Grace.

"I don't see why," said Mollie, pushing some burning scraps back into the heap of blazing paper, "he doesn't tell us what he knows and let us share in the fun."

"He will, when he gets ready," said Betty, adding with a little caper she could not repress: "Oh, girls, it's almost eleven o'clock. Aren't you getting a bit excited?"

"Getting!" drawled Grace. "We have been, all along. Look at Amy," she added with a chuckle,

"hanging up a piece of rag and throwing her jacket on the floor!"

"She has it bad, poor child," laughed Mollie, as, caught in the act, Amy laughed sheepishly.

"If you were attending to your own affairs, you wouldn't have time to see so much," she retorted, proceeding to restore her jacket to its proper place.

"There's one thing we must remember," said Betty soberly. "And that is, not to neglect our Old Maid of the Mountains just because the boys are here. I think she has come to depend on us more than we think."

The girls agreed to this, saying that nothing should make them forget the lonely little old lady in the cabin up on the hill.

And then, a little before they expected them, came the boys.

The girls heard their voices before they saw them, and Betty's heart jumped when she recognized Allen's voice. Not till that moment had she realized how great had been her fear that his "mysterious" case would make it necessary for him to remain in town.

The girls gave one hasty moment to the smoothing of their hair, made untidy by a rather stiff breeze, and the next moment were rushing into the woods to meet the boys half way.

They had agreed not to show too much enthusiasm over the arrival of the latter for the reason, as Mollie had stated, that the boys were getting spoiled with so much attention showered upon them.

But in the joy of the moment the girls forgot all about their resolution, with the result that the boys were treated to a most riotous welcome.

"Seems as if we were getting pretty popular around here, fellows," said Roy, with a grin, and Mollie promptly attempted to put him in his place.

"*Any* man would be welcome under the circumstances," she said haughtily, and not till afterward did the boys think to ask her what she meant by that statement.

As for Allen, he made straight for Betty where she had lingered a little behind the others.

"Say, it's been a long time," he cried boyishly, taking both her hands in his, his brown, handsome face alight with eagerness. "Did you miss me, Betty?"

"Never mind us, Allen," drawled Grace, with a wink at the assembled company. "Would it be doing you a favor to remove ourselves from the surrounding landscape?"

"Don't bother," laughed Allen, while the wild

rose in Betty's face turned a deeper pink. "We don't mind you in the least, do we, Betty?"

"Not at all," said Betty, demurely, and Mollie threw up her hands in despair.

"They're just plain crazy, both of them," she said. A moment later she turned to Frank, adding in a different tone: "What's the matter with you and Will, anyway? You both look as mad as hops."

"That's nothing to the way we feel," Frank assured her, and immediately he and Will poured forth a tale that made the girls stare in surprise and excitement.

It seemed that when Frank and Will had started back to Deepdale the morning after they had spent the night in camp with the girls, helping them get up their tent, they had not gone very far along the road when they had been stopped by a couple of rough-looking men. The latter had flourished pistols at them and commanded them to "Loosen up!"

"Oh! And did you?" queried Amy, horrified.

Will shrugged.

"What else could we do?" he said. "We were unarmed."

"Did—did they steal much?" asked Grace, going around to Will as though to protect him from the danger which had threatened him.

"They took my watch and some odd change I happened to have on me, and forty dollars of Frank's," said Will, at which Frank pulled a long face.

"It was just after pay day," he admitted ruefully.

"And we've been spending all our spare time since trying to find the scoundrels," finished Will, grimly. "And we'll get 'em yet!"

"Let us help," begged Amy. She was always very brave when Will was around. "If you were robbed near here maybe the same tramps did it that have been annoying us."

"What?" cried Allen, his anxious glance traveling toward Betty. He had heard of the set-to the girls had had with the tramps on Triangle Island from Will and Frank, and it is safe to say the young lawyer had not spent a really comfortable minute since. "Are those fellows still bothering you?"

"I think they came again last night," admitted the Little Captain. "They gave us a good deal of a scare, but as soon as they knew we had seen them, they ran off into the woods again."

"Cowards!" muttered Allen, clenching his fist. "I'd just like to get my hands on them!"

"You have nothing on me, old man," Will assured him. "As soon as we get some lunch"—

here he sent a pleading glance in the direction of the girls—"it will be our job to comb the surrounding country pretty thoroughly. If we don't find the thieves, at least we can make a good try at it."

So agitated were the girls and boys over this latest act of the ruffianly tramps that they did not eat lunch with as much zest as usual. All they could think of was their eagerness to start off on a search for the thieves who had so boldly robbed the two boys.

It was decided that they separate into pairs—Allen and Betty, Frank and Mollie, Roy and Grace, and Amy and Will, advancing in different directions through the woods. They were to return to the camp in an hour or two and report what they had found—if anything.

"And we want to make it a point to cover as much distance as possible," said Will, just before they started. "No stopping on the way, you know."

"Speak for yourself, Will Ford," Mollie retorted. "You needn't worry about the rest of us."

Then they parted, setting off briskly on their tour of inspection.

For quite a distance Betty and Allen were silent, occupied with their rather sober

thoughts. Then Betty, realizing that they had not spoken for a long while, looked up at Allen teasingly.

"Don't look so dreadfully black and cross," she said. "Have I offended you, m'lord?"

"Heavens, no," said Allen, adding with a deepening of the scowl on his forehead: "I want to find those tramps, Betty, and put them where they can't cause you any more trouble. I can't tell you how worried I am about leaving you here, alone and unprotected."

"I'm not alone, the girls are with me," Betty protested, with a maddening smile.

"Bosh!" retorted Allen impolitely, at which the Little Captain only chuckled.

There followed another long silence in which they conscientiously searched the surrounding woodland in an attempt to discover something that might give them a clew to the whereabouts of the tramps. Again it was Betty who broke the silence.

"Allen," she said, "you're worried about something else besides me, aren't you?"

Allen started as though she had read his thoughts.

"You are a little witch, aren't you?" he asked, lightly. "You can even tell what a fellow's thinking."

"But what is wrong?" persisted Betty. "Won't you tell me, please?"

Betty was irresistible when she spoke that way —at least she was to Allen.

"I didn't mean to trouble you with it," he said, reluctantly. "Especially as I'm still not at liberty to go into details. But I *am* worried, Betty. You see, it's my duty, as a lawyer, to see that justice is done whenever it is possible. And now I have reason to believe—to know—that a great injustice has been committed and I can't see my way clear to righting the wrong."

"Is it," asked Betty, after a sympathetic silence, "anything to do with that old man's will—the client who died?"

Allen nodded. Then he said suddenly, turning to her with his old cheerful smile: "But we're not going to let shop talk spoil our fun, are we, little Betty? I'll have to be going back on Monday."

"Oh," cried Betty, disappointed, "can't you stay?"

"I'm afraid not," said Allen, gravely. "Business is business, you know."

"Y-yes," said Betty doubtfully. "I suppose so."

CHAPTER XXI

LONELINESS

THE campers failed to find the tramps. Grace and Roy stumbled across an old hut, where it was evident somebody had been living recently, but the place was empty and gave every appearance of desertion. So, after searching thoroughly through the surrounding woods, the two were forced to return to camp with only this meager find to report.

However, as the rest of the party had found no trace whatever of the tramps, Grace and Roy were consoled and began to think that they had, after all, come away with what small honors there were.

The next day the young people took up the search again and pursued it faithfully, but they met with no greater success than they had the day before.

"I'm beginning to think the tramps must live in a hole in the ground," said Grace, disconsolately, as they sat about the campfire Sunday evening recounting the day's experiences.

"If they do, they'll have to come up for air sometime," said Betty, adding belligerently: "And when they do, we'll get 'em!"

"'At a boy," said Frank, adding, as he lazily poked the fire with a stick: "And now what do you say we change the subject? I'm sick of the very name of tramp."

It was with decided reluctance that Allen said good-by to Betty the following morning.

"I wish you'd chuck it all and come back with me," he pleaded for perhaps the fiftieth time. But Betty only shook her head.

"I couldn't," she said. "It would be running away. And besides, we're perfectly safe here."

Allen was not a bit sure about it, but as he had already used all the arguments he could think of, he was forced to give in.

Roy decided to accompany Allen back to Deepdale, saying that, as much as he deplored the fact, duty called him, and the girls, after loud lamentations, finally surrendered to the inevitable.

"I don't see why you pull such long faces," Frank reproached them once. "Won't you have Will and me still with you?"

"Humph," Mollie retorted, "and do you think you're the whole universe?"

And then Allen and Roy were gone, promising to return at the earliest possible moment.

The Outdoor Girls and their two remaining escorts returned to camp to discuss plans for the day. Betty was unusually thoughtful. She was remembering what Allen had said about the injustice that had been done by that old man who had died with something on his mind.

"I hope Allen sees that justice is done, and pretty soon," she mused, rather wistfully. "He is so absorbed and queer these days that he isn't like the old Allen a bit."

She came out of her reverie to find that the boys and girls were in the midst of an animated discussion as to whether they should go fishing or not. It seemed that the boys were for the sport and the girls against it.

"Not for me, thank you," said Grace, decidedly. "Mollie and I spent the whole afternoon a while ago trying for trout and never caught one."

"Oh, well," said Frank, patronizingly, "you just didn't know how to go about it, that's all."

"I tell you what let's do," proposed Betty, wading boldly into the fray. "If you boys want to go fishing, go ahead. And while you're wasting your perfectly good time, we'll go to see the Old Maid of the Mountains."

"The what?" asked both boys together, and at their comical look of perplexity, the girls giggled.

They told of their discovery of the little old lady, and, somewhat to the surprise of the girls, the boys evinced a very real interest. And when Betty graphically related the feast they had had in the cabin of the Old Maid of the Mountains, Frank, in an injured tone, declared:

"It wasn't fair to pull off a party like that without giving us a bid."

After the boys had started out gayly, promising to bring home at least a dozen fish, the girls set out in a different direction. They felt rather penitent because they had not seen the little old lady for two days and they wondered if she had been frightened at all during the storm. Also, they were anxious to see more of her exquisite embroideries.

"It certainly is queer," marveled Mollie, as they neared the little house on the top of the hill, "that we just happened to run across the little old lady and find out she's the same one the girl in the Woman's Exchange told us of."

The girls agreed that it was, Amy adding something unoriginal to the effect that "it was a pretty small world, after all."

The girls found the little old woman as gentle and uncomplaining as ever, although they thought they could sense under the calmness of her manner how much she had missed them.

When Grace asked to see some more of her needlework, the old lady's eyes brightened and she hurried into the next room, returning with two or three pieces of such elaborate and exquisite workmanship that the girls were newly astonished.

"How in the world did you ever learn to do it?" asked Betty.

"My mother taught me when I was a child," returned the queer little person, evidently much pleased and flattered by their admiration. "My mother did wonderful work."

"It couldn't have been better than this," protested Amy, at which the little old lady shook her head doubtfully, although she looked more proud and pleased than ever.

They spent a happy afternoon with their Old Maid of the Mountains, listening to her sprightly reminiscences of "the days when she was young." But as the hours passed there seemed to be a good deal of sadness mixed with her mood and she fell frequently into long silences from which the girls found it difficult to arouse her.

They were worried about her, for she seemed to have grown even more feeble since they had last seen her and she had formed the habit of muttering to herself.

Once Betty heard her say, so softly that the

Little Captain could hardly be sure she heard the words at all:

"The injustice of it, oh, the *injustice* of it!"

Betty wrinkled her pretty brows in a thoughtful expression and sighed, wishing she could do something to help.

"I don't suppose anything can be done, after all," she thought with another sigh. "The world is full of injustice."

During one of her talkative spells the girls learned that the real name of the Old Maid of the Mountains was Isabella Weeks and that the little cabin she now occupied once belonged to her grandfather.

"It's about the only thing I have left," the old lady had said in a burst of confidence and had immediately relapsed into one of her long silences.

On their way back to camp that night the girls were unusually thoughtful. Through Betty's head kept running persistently the refrain of the little old lady's muttered words:

"The injustice of it, oh, the *injustice* of it!"

CHAPTER XXII

A CLEW

As THE Outdoor Girls were nearing camp Mollie finally broke the long silence that had fallen upon them.

"Something's got to be done for that old lady," she said, explosively. "She oughtn't to live up there all alone. Didn't you notice to-day how queer she acted? It's enough to drive anybody crazy, living alone like that."

"I think she has probably had a great deal of trouble——" began Amy.

"Humph," grunted Mollie. "She has plenty of that now."

"Yes, but I mean in her early life," persisted Amy. "Do you notice that every time she tries to tell us about something real connected with her girlhood she brings herself up short——"

"And closes up like a clam?" Grace finished, adding, with a nod: "Yes, I've noticed that."

"I suppose if her past life hasn't been pleasant," said Betty, gently, "she naturally wouldn't want to talk about it."

"That's true, of course," argued Mollie. "But she doesn't have to be so—so—secretive about it. She acts as though there were some mystery that she was trying to conceal."

"Well, it's her mystery," drawled Grace. "I suppose she has a perfect right to conceal it if she wants to."

"But we really ought to help her," said Mollie, going back to her original point. "She's far too old and feeble to be living alone."

They walked on for a while in silence and then Mollie asked suddenly:

"By the way, Betty—I meant to ask you before —has Allen said anything about that case he was working on?"

"Not much," answered Betty, "except that he's still working on it. He says he can't really say anything about it yet."

"There you go again," said Mollie, feeling injured. "I believe he's just cooking up something, so as to make us curious."

"Hardly," laughed Betty, adding, reasonably: "It must be pretty serious to keep him in town, you know, when he's crazy to be here with us. Well, what in the world——" she broke off to stare as they came out into the open space before their camp.

Frank and Will had returned from their fish-

ing trip and, unlike Mollie and Grace, they had not returned empty-handed. No wonder the girls stared. There were at least a dozen good-sized fish in the pan, all cleaned and ready for cooking. Having got thus far in their preparations, the boys had turned their attention to the making of a fire good enough to do justice to the day's catch.

When they espied the girls they beckoned to them gleefully.

"Come hither and look what we have brought," called Frank, invitingly.

"We see it!" exclaimed Betty heartily. "You sure did have good luck!"

"Good luck nothing," snorted Will. "That's all the credit you ever get for being a high-class sportsman."

"I suppose," said Mollie, with elaborate sarcasm, "that you simply whistled to the innocent fish and they came running."

"Swimming," corrected Frank, gravely, at which nonsense they were forced to laugh.

The delightful days passed one after another till it was almost time to look for Allen and Roy again. They fished and hiked and took long rides in the *Gem* and generally and thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

However, even in the height of their fun the

girls never forgot Miss Weeks, their little Old Maid of the Mountains. They even one day enticed her down to their camp, taking the easiest and shortest way, later giving her a ride in the motor boat.

Although the little old lady seemed to enjoy herself immensely, the ride was never repeated. In spite of the girls' attentions and the wholesome food they continued to supply her with, the little old lady grew paler day by day until she finally became so feeble it seemed as though a strong wind might blow her away altogether.

And because the girls had taken a profound interest in the lonesome old lady and had grown very fond of her they worried a good deal about her condition and tried hard to think of some way in which they might help her without hurting her pride.

But it seemed a problem that was almost impossible of solution and for the present, at least, they were forced to give it up.

And then Allen and Roy were with them once more, Allen still grave and thoughtful, but very, very glad to be with them, just the same.

He was relieved when the boys and girls told him there had been no sign of the tramps during his absence and it might have been noticed that he looked at Betty as though he thought it al-

together too good to be true that she was still safe and happy.

"You don't know what I've been through," he told her a little later that same day. They had become separated from the others and, finding a convenient stone wall, had hoisted themselves upon it, swinging their feet and all ready for a good old "pow-wow." "I've imagined all sorts of awful things happening to you," Allen went on, while Betty demurely looked the other way. "I had you so much on my mind that I couldn't half attend to my work."

"I'm sorry," said Betty, still demurely. "I tried to behave myself."

"I can't believe it," said Allen, banteringly. "I've never seen you do it yet."

"Well," said Betty comfortably, "I don't intend to argue about it. The weather's too warm, and, besides, we never do agree."

"I think we do—sometimes—very well," said Allen, and at his tone, Betty hastily changed the subject.

"Tell me," she said, "about what you have been doing in town. Have you found out any more about what that poor old man had on his mind?"

"I know all about that," said Allen, the puzzled frown growing on his forehead which Betty had come to associate with any mention of the case

he was working on. I know the old man and his motives from A to Z. If I could only find his sister——"

"His sister!" Betty exclaimed, surprised, and Allen bit his lip.

"I shouldn't have said that," he said, adding, abruptly: "Let's talk of something else."

"I don't know anything to talk about," said Betty, a little coolly. She did not like the way Allen shut her out of his confidence, even if it was business. "We've been having lots of fun, but not very much adventure."

"Miss me?" he questioned, and immediately Betty became her old tantalizing self once more. She smiled at him mysteriously and murmured, with her face turned the other way: "Wouldn't you like to know?"

It was Allen's turn to be put out. Since he said nothing, neither did Betty, and for some time they sat staring before them, each busy with his own thoughts.

It was Betty at last who broke the rather ridiculous silence by speaking of the Old Maid of the Mountains. By Allen's blank stare she realized that this was the first mention he had heard of their little old lady.

"Let's get down and join the others," said Betty, as she swung herself to the ground, "and

while we're on the way I'll tell you of our queer little discovery."

Betty had expected Allen to be rather mildly interested, but she was not prepared for the sudden keen interest he showed when she mentioned the exquisite needlework of the little old lady.

"What kind of embroidery does she do?" he queried, excitedly.

"Why," said Betty, puzzled at his attitude, "she does all kinds——"

"Any special design, or pattern?" asked Allen, impatiently.

"Why," returned Betty, "I do recall that she seemed to have a special fancy for butterflies and roses. It's Danish embroidery she does, very elaborate and a great deal of open work. But why, Allen? Why are you so anxious to know?"

Allen countered with another question.

"Can I—will it be possible—for me to see this old lady?" he asked, almost feverishly.

"Allen," said Betty, with a chuckle, "in just about a moment I'll be getting jealous!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LEAN-TO

For answer Allen took Betty by the shoulder and shook her gently.

"Betty," he said, "I don't think you understand how really important this is to me. If this old lady is who I think she is, all my difficulties are solved."

"But I don't see——"

"I'll tell you, then," interrupted Allen. There was no doubt but what he was terribly in earnest and something of his excitement communicated itself to Betty.

"You remember this man who died—my client?" he began again, striding along, his hands in his pockets, a furious frown on his face.

"Remember him?" echoed Betty. "When have I had a chance to forget——"

But again Allen interrupted impatiently.

"This old man," said the young lawyer, and despite herself Betty was impressed by his earnestness, "was, as I think I have told you before,

a pretty stubborn fellow. What he believed, he believed with all his heart and, what was more, he never allowed any one to argue with him."

For the life of her Betty could not see what this had to do with the Old Maid of the Mountains. But she said nothing, merely wrinkling up her nose in bewilderment as Allen rushed on.

"In his younger days," continued Allen, "he was in partnership with a man named James Barton. Now it seems that this old man, this client of mine, had a bitter quarrel with his partner.

"People who knew both the men when they were young—and I have had occasion to talk to quite a few of them in connection with the case and in hope of clearing up the mystery—say that no one knew the cause of the quarrel and neither of the two men would say a word about it one way or another."

"But what has that to do——" began Betty, becoming more and more puzzled.

"I'm telling you," insisted Allen. She had never known him to be so impatient of interruption before. "Just about here enters the sister of Luther Weeks."

"Weeks! Weeks! Luther Weeks!" repeated Betty, gazing wide-eyed at Allen. "Who was he?"

"Luther Weeks was the name of the old man who just died—my client," explained Allen, trying hard to be patient.

"Oh!" exclaimed Betty, and then as the thing came to her with full force she gripped his arm excitedly. "Allen," she cried, "that is the name of our old lady—our Old Maid of the Mountains! Isabella Weeks!"

"Then that practically settles it," returned Allen, the light of great relief in his eyes. "By Jove, but this is luck!"

"You haven't really told me anything," cried Betty, shaking his arm, for it was her turn to be impatient. "Even if our Old Maid of the Mountains is the sister of your dead client, I don't see——"

"That's the romantic—and pathetic—part of it," said Allen, softly. "In her youth Isabella Weeks was engaged to be married to James Barton, the partner of her brother, Luther Weeks."

"Oh!" exclaimed Betty, then clapped her hand over her mouth, waiting eagerly for Allen to go on.

"When the partners quarreled," the young lawyer continued, slowly, "Luther Weeks commanded his sister to give up Barton."

"And did she do it?" asked Betty, with all

the incredulity of a modern girl for such weakness. "Surely she wouldn't give her lover up because her brother told her to."

"No," answered Allen, with a shake of his head, "I imagine she wouldn't have sent James Barton away if that had been the only reason."

"Then what other was there?" asked Betty, adding with an impatient shake of the head: "Oh, Allen, you are so slow!"

"Give me time," protested Allen, with a smile for her impatience. Impatience was marvelously becoming to Betty. "It seems," he went on, "that Luther Weeks got it into his crusty head that James Barton had mishandled funds belonging to the firm."

"Oh," said Betty, softly, with a swift pang of pity for the Isabella Weeks of that time. "And had he, Allen?"

Allen shook his head soberly.

"That's just the pity of it," he said. "After Luther Weeks had done all the damage he could do by his accusations—driving his sister from him and separating her from the man she loved —he found out that Barton had been perfectly sincere and upright in all his transactions."

"And what had happened to him then—to James Barton, I mean?" asked Betty breathlessly.

"He had disappeared," said Allen. "Went to

some other country, perhaps, to start life over again."

"And Isabella never saw him again?" asked Betty, pityingly.

"Never, so far as any one knows," replied Allen, adding grimly: "I tell you Luther Weeks has had a good deal to answer for."

"And so that is what he—Luther Weeks, that is—had on his conscience?" Betty rather stated than asked. "What about his will, Allen?"

"His will makes restitution as far as restitution is possible," returned Allen. "He left all his money to his sister, Isabella Weeks, in case she could be found."

Betty's face lighted joyfully.

"Oh, Allen," she cried, "did he leave much money?"

"It isn't a fortune, but it's enough. Forty thousand dollars."

Betty drew in her breath sharply.

Allen," she breathed, "do you realize what that will mean to our Old Maid of the Mountains? Not a fortune! It will seem limitless wealth to her. Oh, I'm so glad—I'm so glad!"

They heard the voices of the other girls and boys directly ahead of them and, taking Allen by the hand, the Little Captain dragged him eagerly forward.

"Oh, hurry, hurry!" she begged. "I can't wait to tell them!" She paused, eyeing Allen half doubtfully. "It will be all right to tell them, won't it?" she asked.

"Perfectly," said Allen, cheerfully. "I don't care how many of them know about it now. The more the merrier."

So Betty experienced the unutterable delight of breaking the glad news to the girls. And, even before she had finished, they were all, by mutual consent, starting in the direction of the cabin of the Old Maid of the Mountains.

"I can't believe it yet," said Mollie, her eyes looking as if they were about to pop out of her head with wonder and delight. "And to think that just the other day we were wondering what we could do to help her."

"I can't wait to see her face when we tell her," said Grace, smiling in happy anticipation. "I reckon she will turn all rosy and pink, the way it does sometimes when she forgets to be sad."

"It seems too wonderful to be true," said quiet Amy, adding in a soft little voice as if she were half ashamed of what she was saying: "Sometimes it does seem that if you try very hard to help some one and wish very hard for their happiness, something beautiful happens in the end."

"It surely seems that way," said the Little Captain.

Will took Amy's hand in his for a moment saying, with an adoring look:

"Any one is lucky to have you rooting for him, Amy Blackford."

And so absorbed were they all that no one noticed they had taken the wrong path until they had gone for a considerable distance into the woods.

This was the easiest kind of mistake to make, for at one point the two woods paths intersected, going on from the point of intersection almost at right angles, one to the other. In their preoccupation, the young folks had taken the wrong path.

"A perfectly simple thing to do," Roy declared. "But not a very serious mistake except in that it will take us a little longer to reach the Old Maid of the Mountains with the glad news."

In their present state of impatience, however, any sort of delay seemed almost tragic, and the girls grumbled considerably as they turned to retrace their steps.

They had gone only a few feet when a call from Frank brought them to a startled standstill. There was something in his voice that made them turn quickly toward him.

"Look," he said in a cautiously lowered tone, as he pointed ahead into the woods. "See that smoke over there? Means a camp of some sort."

"Let's go and investigate," said Will immediately, feeling a sudden terrific thirst for battle. "It was just a little further on that those tramps attacked us the other day. Maybe—say maybe——" He said no more but began running full speed through the woods toward the spiral of smoke that curled upward through the trees.

The girls had almost forgotten about the tramps by that time, but Will's excitement and lust of battle communicated itself to them and they followed him hotfoot, careful the while to make as little noise as possible.

"We're probably following a false scent again," gasped Mollie. "There isn't one chance in a hundred there are tramps anywhere around here."

As they approached closer to their goal they could distinctly hear the sound of voices, and their approach became still more cautious. Creeping closer, they saw through the trees the most curious little structure they had ever laid eyes on.

It was a hut, hardly more than a lean-to, made of logs and piled together in haphazard fashion. Grass and leaves had been used to stuff up the cracks, and on one side—the side nearest the

girls and boys—was a small opening, evidently intended for a window.

"I wonder what they do when it rains," Betty whispered to Mollie, who had pressed up close beside her. "They haven't thought to put glass in their window."

"Maybe," said Mollie, with a suppressed chuckle, "it never rains on this side of the house."

But Will had stolen near enough to the cabin —if such it could be called—to look in through the window. Now he crept back to them holding up a cautioning hand.

"They're in there!" he whispered, his eyes black with excitement and eagerness. "The roughnecks who robbed us and a couple of others as well!"

CHAPTER XXIV

ROMANCE

WHILE the Outdoor Girls were still staring at Will as though they could not believe their ears, there came to them another sound that made them start and look over their shoulders toward the roadway.

From that direction came a babble of voices—many voices—raised in excited and angry expostulation. The girls and boys hesitated, a bit bewildered by this new turn of affairs, not knowing exactly what to do.

And in that moment things began to happen!

Out of that crazy lean-to rushed the tramps, throwing frightened glances over their shoulders toward the roadway from which direction the voices were steadily growing louder. They did not, in that first moment, see the boys and girls, for the latter were pretty well hidden by the trees and shrubbery.

And when they did see them, it was too late—for two of the tramps at least.

With a yell that startled the girls more than the sight of the tramps, Will and Frank sprang forward, grappling with two of the men while Allen and Roy rushed off in hot pursuit of the other two.

It seemed at first as if the boys were going to get the worst of the hand-to-hand struggle, for the men were burly ruffians and they fought with the fury of desperation.

But Will and Frank were desperate too—and mad clean through. They were getting revenge for that other time when they had been held up in the open road and robbed of their money and watches.

It was a terrible fight while it lasted, but it came to an end with great suddenness. Not for nothing had the boys studied the art of wrestling.

It was Will who first got the better of his enemy, tripping him neatly as he lunged forward, and then, as the burly ruffian fell, sitting none too lightly on his chest.

Frank came a close second, smiting his opponent a knockout blow on the point of the jaw that stretched him senseless upon the ground.

So it happened that when Allen and Roy returned red and perspiring to announce that the

other two men had gotten clean away and eager to offer assistance to Will and Frank, they found the latter in no need whatever of their aid.

And the next moment there burst through the trees a dozen of the queerest characters the girls had ever seen—an assorted collection of farmers from all over the countryside. And these bewhiskered gentlemen were angry, there was no doubt in the world about that. Even their chin-whiskers trembled with wrath.

It had all happened so suddenly that the girls felt a trifle dizzy. Besides, they did want dreadfully to laugh. Those funny old men staring at them for all the world as though they were to blame—and Will sitting on the fat tramp's chest!

Mollie did giggle hysterically and one of the farmers, a red-faced old man, swung about at the slight sound.

"I can't see what all's so funny," he said reprovingly, at which all the girls got suddenly red in the face and had to turn away for a minute to gain control of their emotions. The red-faced old farmer gazed suspiciously at their backs, then turned to Will.

"What you doin' settin' there?" he asked, at which Will grinned broadly.

"It's the most comfortable seat I've had in a long time," he said, rising and dusting off his hands. "Ever since this rascal here relieved me of my watch and my friend of his money, I've dreamed of sitting on his neck in just this way."

"Look out," cried Betty suddenly. She had recovered her composure and from the tail of her eye had noticed that Frank's victim was coming to. "He's going to get away."

"Nothing like that!" cried Frank, as with one lunge he sank his hand in the tramp's collar. "After me spoiling a good set of knuckles on his jaw?"

And then the farmers, who up to this time had been too much amazed to do anything, explained that they also were after the tramps. They had been missing all sorts of poultry and fruit for a long time past but had not been able to figure out who had done the damage.

However, on the night before, Samuel Jones—he of the red face and self-appointed leadership—had caught a couple of the rascals in the very act of stealing two of his best hens and had made after them.

In vain did he bestir his pudgy legs in an entirely unaccustomed spurt of speed—the thieves had been too quick for him. However, before they had disappeared he had recognized them as

a couple of ill-favored scamps who had been seen loitering around the countryside.

"And so," he finished, his chin whiskers quivering still more violently with emotion, "I got together a posse of our leadin' citizens, as you might say, an' we come a-huntin' for these here thieves what comes around in the middle of the night stealin' from honest men. Much obliged to you, young fellers, for doin' the job up so neat for us."

"Don't mention it," said Frank. Will adding with a grin:

"It was a great pleasure!"

Next thing, the tramps were commanded to "loosen up and come across with the goods." At first they sullenly refused, but upon Frank threatening to administer another upper cut and the farmers raising their shotguns suggestively, the scoundrels changed their minds and grudgingly led the way into the log hut.

Even then the boys had no real hope of getting back the things that had been stolen from them. The robbery had occurred long enough before to have given the tramps plenty of time to dispose of both watch and money.

But they were agreeably surprised and delighted when, upon a little further persuasion, the fellows revealed a hiding place in one corner of the

hut—a hole about a foot deep, lined with stones and covered with several boards which, in turn, were covered with stones and dirt.

With a whoop of joy Will pulled from this hiding place not only his watch and a wallet filled with money—four ten dollar bills which Frank positively identified as his own—but two newly plucked chickens carefully wrapped in newspaper to keep them from the dirt.

Samuel Jones' eyes shone and his mouth beneath the whiskers was grim as he turned to his companions.

"An' you were tellin' me," he said, in a voice shrill with triumph, "that I didn't know what I wuz talkin' about. Them two hens is mine, I'm tellin' you, stole from me at twelve o'clock last night. Now you'll believe me, mebbe."

"Too bad to do the poor hobos out of a good chicken dinner," Allen suggested, with a twinkle in his eye as Mr. Jones carefully tucked his property under one arm, taking his shotgun in the other. "Just when they had it all prepared, too!"

"Humph!" grunted Jones. "They'll git their dinner all right—in the county jail. Come along, you two. Forward march, now. An' make it snappy too. We ain't in no humorin' mood."

"Well," said Betty, her eyes dancing as she watched the "posse" disappear through the trees,

the sullen tramps marching sheepishly along with them, "if that isn't the snappiest work I ever saw, then I wouldn't say so. Boys, you deserve a medal."

"And to think you got your watch and money and everything!" said Grace delightedly, as Frank fondly caressed his recovered bank roll and Will slipped his beloved watch back into his pocket.

"It was a lucky chance that led us to take the wrong path all right," sighed Amy, who was secretly worrying for fear Will had received some broken bones or internal injuries in the fray.

"The only thing that makes me mad," said Allen, as they turned to retrace their steps, "is that we didn't catch the other two scoundrels, Roy. It seemed a shame to let them get off scot free."

"Tough luck," agreed Roy, adding philosophically: "Though I guess they've had scare enough to keep them away from this neighborhood for some time to come."

Once again they reached the intersection of the two paths, and this time chose the one that led to the cabin of the Old Maid of the Mountains. Instinctively they increased their pace, eagerly impatient to see the old lady.

When they reached the little house on the hill there was no sign of its owner anywhere. They

had half expected to find her seated outside the door, enjoying the sunshine, as was her custom, and the deserted aspect of her front yard alarmed them.

They hurried forward anxiously. Then, just before they reached the cabin, all the boys except Allen dropped behind on the plea that a crowd of strangers might startle the old lady.

"Of course it's necessary for Allen to be among those present, but as for us, we prefer to wait outside," stated Roy.

At Betty's soft knock a faint voice called to them to enter. They found the Old Maid of the Mountains pottering about some household tasks and her rare old face lighted up at sight of the girls.

Then she caught sight of Allen and her hand flew to her throat in that gesture of alarm the girls had come to know so well.

"Who—who are you?" she gasped.

Very gently the Little Captain put an arm about her and pushed her into a chair.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Weeks," she said. "We've brought you some very good news. Do you feel strong enough to hear it?"

"Yes, oh, yes!" said the little old lady, still staring at Allen.

It was then that the young lawyer came for-

ward. Betty introduced him very simply and he explained to Isabella Weeks as gently as he could what had transpired within the last few weeks.

During the greater part of the recital she sat like one dazed and who finds it hard to comprehend. Only once did she show any real emotion, and that was when Allen spoke of James Barton's innocence.

"Innocent!" she cried, a great pride flashing up in her eyes. "You need not tell me that. I was not the one who doubted his innocence. But before I could tell him that he had gone, thinking himself disgraced. But go on," she added, gently. "I did not mean to interrupt."

So Allen finished his story, telling of her brother's death and the will which he had made in her favor. She seemed more startled at first by the mention of the money which was now hers than she was delighted.

"What would I do with all that money?" she cried, almost with dismay. "I could not use it all."

"But you could use some of it," said Betty, adding, slyly: "Wouldn't it be rather nice for instance to have a pretty home with roses over the door and a maid or two to wait upon you and never another worry as long as you live?"

The old lady smiled, gently stroking Betty's soft cheek.

"It would be nice," she said. "Especially the roses. And butterflies. Do you think there will be butterflies?" She asked the last question with all the wistfulness of a child and this time it was Mollie who was quick to promise.

"You shall have dozens of them," she said. "And they'll be every color of the rainbow."

This reminded Allen of the embroideries which had been the main clew leading to the discovery of the old lady. He asked if he might see them, and a moment later a handful were given to him for his inspection. Man though he was, he could not but see the rare beauty of the work, and when he handed them back to Isabella Weeks there was a new respect in his eyes.

"Your brother spoke particularly of your fine needlework," he said, adding gravely: "Your brother was very, very anxious that you should be found. Almost his last words were of you with the hope that, if you still lived, you would some day come to forgive him for his cruel injustice."

Tears filled the old lady's eyes.

"He was forgiven long ago," she murmured.

Allen was about to turn away out of respect

for her emotion when she suddenly laid a frail old hand on his arm.

"And James Barton?" she murmured. "Is he—Do you know where he is?"

Allen shook his head.

"Would you like to have me find him?" he asked gently.

The girls looked at their little Old Maid of the Mountains and found that their own eyes were filled with tears. The old lady was blushing like any girl and for the moment her sweet old face was almost beautiful.

"Oh, yes!" she answered eagerly.

"Then," said Allen, covering her thin little hand with his own strong brown one, "James Barton shall be found!"

CHAPTER XXV

YOUNG HEARTS

NEVER before in all their rather adventurous lives had the Outdoor Girls been so thrilled. It seemed incredible to them that their Old Maid of the Mountains whom they had befriended out of pity should turn out to be the heroine of such a genuine romance.

As for the little old lady herself, she professed an eager desire to get back to the city, and although she gave as her reason a natural wish to have legal matters in regard to her dead brother's will settled, the girls knew that in reality she was hoping to meet James Barton, the wronged lover of her younger days.

As soon as it was settled that Isabella Weeks was to return to the city, there to occupy a small apartment until she should secure a more suitable home, the girls lost all interest in their camp. They had about decided to return to Deepdale with the old lady when the latter herself settled the question for them.

Allen had returned to town, intent upon carrying out his promise to find James Barton, if such a thing were possible. But the other boys had remained with the girls at the camp, thinking that since the latter were planning to return to Deepdale so soon anyway, they, the boys, might wait so all could go together.

They were up at her cabin one day soon after the breaking of the news. Isabella Weeks suddenly turned to the girls, a wistful expression on her sweet old face.

"I have a favor to ask of you," she said, and paused, while the puzzled girls waited for her to go on. "I wonder," said the old lady after a moment, "if you would take pity on an old woman and help her find a pretty little home somewhere——"

The girls did not wait for her to finish. Ardently they hugged her, assuring her that there was nothing in the world they would like better than to help her.

"We wanted to ask you to let us," said Amy, taking one old hand in hers and patting it gently, "but we thought you might think we were interfering——"

"Oh, my dears," the little old lady replied, with a catch in her breath, "you could never interfere. Why, everything I have, I owe to you."

And though this statement was not quite true, the girls did not think it worth while to contradict the little lady, for they loved to see her with that soft flush of excitement on her cheeks and the light of a new found interest in her eyes.

Thus it came to pass that the girls found themselves in the agreeable position of escort to the Old Maid of the Mountains and they looked forward eagerly to their return to Deepdale and the finding of the "right kind of little home" for their friend.

"It does seem a shame," Mollie remarked when a few days later they were clearing up the camp preparatory to leaving for Deepdale the next morning, "to go home when we still have several weeks of lovely weather before us."

"We'll still have lovely weather in Deepdale," retorted Grace. "And I, for one, wouldn't miss the fun we're going to have for all the camping in the world."

"Nor I," agreed Betty, adding wistfully: "I do hope Allen can find James Barton."

"Oh, I hope so!" echoed Amy fervently. "Miss Weeks has so set her heart on finding him that it will be a terrible blow if he fails to turn up."

"What I'm afraid of," said Mollie, with a dark frown while she carefully folded an extra blanket, "is that this old lover of hers is dead.

After all these years it would be hardly possible that he's still alive. Allen said he was several years older than our old lady, and she's pretty old."

"Goodness! don't be so gloomy," protested the Little Captain. "I'm not going to believe anything like that until I have to."

The next morning, ably assisted by the boys, the girls got their paraphernalia aboard the *Gem*. It was a glorious morning, a fact for which they were profoundly grateful. The trip would be hard enough on the little old lady, under the most favorable circumstances, and bad weather would be sure to complicate matters.

However, luck was on their side and they accomplished the journey without the slightest mishap. The engine of the *Gem* was working beautifully, with the result that they made record time.

Once the little boat was made fast to the dock at Deepdale Betty rushed up to her house, explained to her understanding and sympathetic mother about the old lady, and then, backing her little roadster out of the garage, rushed back to the dock again.

Then she drove off with the old lady, leaving the boys and the other girls to attend to the *Gem* and the disposal of its cargo. For Betty, like the

Little Captain she was, had decided to take the Old Maid of the Mountains to her own home until she and the other girls should have a chance to find the ideal home for the little old lady.

Mrs. Nelson welcomed her guest with her usual warm kindliness and, seeing that Miss Weeks was nearly exhausted from the unusual exertion of the morning, hurried her off to bed, promising to have "something hearty" sent up on a tray.

To Isabella Weeks it was untold luxury to be so fussed over and cared for. She tried several times to express her gratitude, but emotion so choked her that the words would not come.

Once when Betty was starting to leave the room, she caught at the girl's hand, pressing it for a moment to her withered old cheek.

"I was right," she murmured. "Your mother is very lovely, dear child; and you are just like her."

Then followed days of house hunting and furniture selection that were pure joy to the Outdoor Girls. Although the little old lady was too frail to go with them on their shopping trips, each evening they talked over the adventures of the day with her, telling her just what they had bought and submitting long lists, with the price opposite each article, for her inspection.

They found exactly the right kind of house,

a little four-room bungalow with a broad, low porch and window boxes in every window. This they furnished gayly with wicker and cretonne and comfortable cushions heaped up everywhere.

When it was all ready—complete even to the maid with white cap and apron—they proudly bore the old lady to her new home, triumphantly exhibiting the results of their work.

The old lady seemed completely carried away with delight. And so they were taken totally unawares when after an inspection of the four rooms the owner of the pretty bungalow dropped into a deep-seated, gayly-cushioned chair and, covering her face with her hands, began to weep silently.

Disconcerted, utterly bewildered, the girls stared at her. But suddenly the little old lady lifted a face to them that was radiant through the tears.

"Don't be alarmed, my dears," she said, in her quaint, wistful way. "I'm not ill. I don't believe joy ever made any one ill, do you?"

"Not ever in the world!" answered the Little Captain, happily.

Days followed during which the girls were almost always with Isabella Weeks. Through all the red tape of legal procedure she insisted on their presence. And though her health seemed to im-

prove daily, owing to good food and good care and lack of worry, the girls noticed that she was restless and uneasy, seeming always to listen for some one who did not come.

"She's waiting for James Barton," thought Betty, adding softly: "I hope we hear good news from Allen soon."

Betty heard from the young lawyer nearly every day, but he gave no assurance that he would be able to locate James Barton. In fact, he was so noncommittal about the result of his search that the girls finally began to believe the worst.

Then one evening, as Betty read to the old lady and the rest of the girls lounged about the pretty living room, there was a sudden sounding of a motor horn from without the house that drew them all to their feet.

The little old lady turned suddenly white, her hand flew to her throat. Betty, having glanced out the window, came over and laid a quieting hand on the old lady's shoulder. One would never have told from Betty's voice how her heart was thumping.

"It's Allen," she said, softly. "And he has some one with him."

The next moment the door was flung open and Allen himself stepped inside the room. Beside

him was one of the handsomest old gentlemen the girls had ever seen. Erect and soldierly in his bearing, broad-shouldered and ruddy of face, with a mass of curly iron gray hair, he was the kind of man one instinctively turns and stares after in the street.

There was a moment of tense silence while the two who had been lovers in their youth looked deep into each other's eyes. Then James Barton started forward, eager hands outstretched.

"Isabella!" he cried. "After all the wasted years I've come to you! Are you glad?"

"Oh, my dear!" the words seemed wrung from the little old lady as she lifted her face to him. "All my life—I think—I've waited for this moment——"

Stumblingly, eyes blinded by tears, the girls found themselves outside the house. Somehow Betty's hand slipped into Allen's.

"You—you're wonderful, Allen!" she whispered. "How did you ever do it?"

The young lawyer leaned close to her.

"I promised I would, didn't I?" said he.

Two weeks later on a gloriously sunshiny morning, within the dim interior of "the little church around the corner" before the minister stood a pair of lovers, old in years but possessing the

priceless gift of hearts that will always be young.

The slender, blue-veined hand of the little Old Maid of the Mountains trembled in the grip of James Barton but her voice was sweet and resolute as she answered clearly, "I do."

Back in the pew where four Outdoor Girls and four stalwart lads were gathered, there sounded a muffled little sob. It was Amy who was crying and Will quite openly and shamelessly held her hand.

Then gently, as though unconsciously, Allen's arm stole about the Little Captain, drawing her close to him. And because of the warmth about her heart—perhaps because of other reasons too, who knows?—Betty did not draw away.

THE END

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